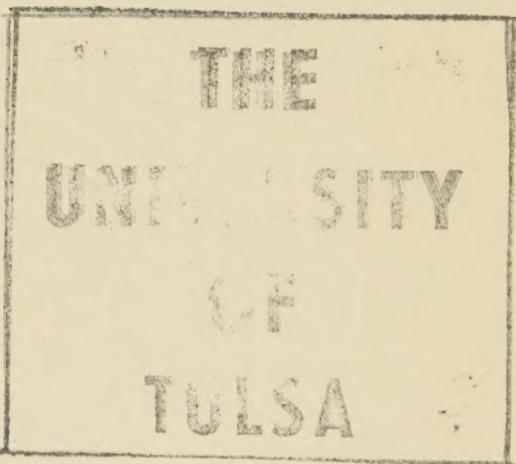


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KIMMIE

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a Novel

by

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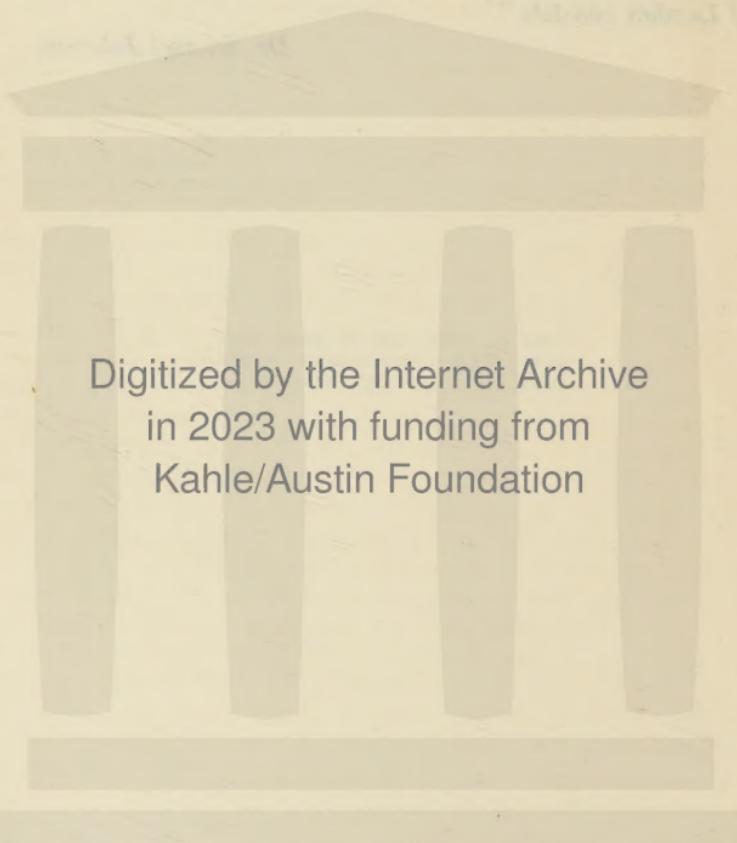
Dedication
For the D.L.W.

THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS.

Made and Printed in Great Britain
for Hurst & Blackett, Ltd., 55
Pont Street, London, S.W.1, at
The Gainsborough Press, St. Albans,
Fisher Knight & Co. Ltd.

“Sir, if you wish to have a just notion of the magnitude of this city, you must not be satisfied with seeing its great streets and squares, but must survey the innumerable little lanes and courts. It is not in the showy evolutions of buildings, but in the multiplicity of human habitations which are crowded together, that the wonderful immensity of London consists.”

Dr. Samuel Johnson.



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CHAPTER ONE

IT was only in the early morning that Armynter Court was at all noisy; at other times, compared with Jermyn Street, its outlet, it was a quiet place in which to live—for a city, that is. It was a busy courtyard, too, most of the day and night, in spasms, but from six a.m. until after the dustman had been, at eight, there was a series of seemingly continuous sounds, and Kimmie Blaxland, no matter how she buried her ears beneath the bedclothes, semi-somnolently identified them daily . . . firstly, the night porter at the smart Armynter Court House, prior to his departure for home, stoked-up in the boiler room, so that the occupants of those luxury flats would continue to have the modern convenience of 'running hot and cold at all hours,' as the booklet informed the prospective tenant. The porter seemed to enjoy being as noisy as possible, as if he resented the fact that other people were asleep; when he stopped shovelling the coke, he always hurled the shovel on to the cement floor of the boiler room, where it clanged disapprovingly, then he slammed the door, and went off home whistling stridently, his face gnarled and black, he looked like a prune, Kimmie thought. Next, there was the milkman who entered the Court to deliver the first round for the day and who made 'bottley' sounds until, at six-thirty, just as he faded in to the distance, the sudden startling ring of the alarm clock in Mr. Brember's, the Yacht Man's Flat, followed, and, although Kimmie braced herself in bed a few minutes before it went off, nevertheless, it never failed to make her jump.

At seven, Bert, who had lost an arm at the airborne landing at Arnhem, came to wash down the floors at the *Duke's Arms*, and to box and stack the empties outside the saloon bar for the draymen to collect later in the day. Perhaps having to do this with only one arm made it a rowdy business, Kimmie reasoned. Slightly overlapping this, a quiet-looking woman, with a particularly penetrating voice, came out into the Court and slowly walked her dog. The click-clack of her heels as she approached Kimmie's end of the Court was punctuated by the pauses she made whilst Roddy, the dog, sniffed, with delight, the matutinal surprises the courtyard had to offer, these included the solitary lamp-post in the middle of it, the corner of the *Duke's Arms*, and the dust-bins in front of the Milk Bar. Sometimes, with pleasure, the dog would identify the scents of other dogs; sometimes, with the feeling of battle, other animals such as cats and a rat or two; and, now and again, it would rummage among the pieces that had fallen from the dust bin,

and find a bone. This never failed to bring forth a loud plea from its owner of: "Rod-dee, ugh! Naughtee! filth-ee!" And Kimmie, before she got out of bed one morning to satisfy her sleepy curiosity, had visions of a Chinese lady walking a particularly supercilious pekingese, but the woman turned out to be very prosaic and very British, and the dog Roddy had nothing to recommend it particularly. It had a variety of ancestors of a baser canine sort, and none of them of a high pedigree, Kimmie could see that.

The chaps, Em and Carrie, at the Milk Bar were the next arrivals, they were old, but business-like and they were wide in the hips, as if they had put on their dresses and coat-hangers were inside, but had slipped. They banged mats, moved stools, sang in quavering tuneless voices the popular tunes of the day, and seized any opportunity they could of indulging in a high-pitched cackle which ended in a form of mutual admiration which took the form of a glib but admiring "What a scream!" and the somewhat surprising "Sez you!"

When Kimmie, drowsily supplying the mental pictures to the sounds, heard the footsteps of Max, who owned the Cigarette-Haircut kiosk by the Archway leading out to Jermyn Street, followed by his grunt as he lifted the corrugated covering which clamped down in front of the little shop, she knew that it was time to get up. She hated alarm clocks, and had no need of them at Armynter Court. With a sigh she raised her head to look out of the half-open window with the half-drawn blinds to see what sort of a day it was. It was raining. Kimmie groaned. Ordinarily she liked the rain, but it was a bad omen on a Friday, for her.

She stretched and slowly moved out of the divan bed and went across to the gas ring by the empty fire-grate and put a light under the kettle, which she had half-filled the previous evening. Next she switched on the radio and then went out into the bath-kitchen to light the Ascot. She hurried now because Dead Pan Mary Hockey-Marking would be along soon. She went to the flat door and opened it an inch, listening in case there was anyone in the passage before she opened it sufficiently widely for her to bring in the milk and her daily paper. There had been one awful occasion when Mr. Rory Malone the artist in the flat above, had been passing (one never could be sure if he was just going up to bed or had been out for a long walk, he always looked tired) and had stood entranced, or so it seemed, at the sight of her in rumpled pyjamas.

Kimmie took her 'early' cup of tea into the bathroom and sipped it as she bathed. As she did so, she thought with pleasure of her little domain, and blessed the day she had acquired 7a Armynter Court; what more could a girl want—a place of one's own, privacy, and a bathroom? Then her brow clouded as she reconsidered this. There was a great deal more a girl desired, but could not have! She sighed, and became sad again at the thought of the perversity of life; of the fact that it was Friday; of annoyance at the rain; of the wretchedness of ambition, of the unsatisfactory business of being in love . . . at

nineteen, Kimmie's life was decidedly full, though she considered it very empty.

Priscilla removing the shutters from the greengrocer's in the yard meant that it was eight-thirty and at any moment Dead Pan Hockey-Marking would whistle, which would mean that it was time to go down to the Milk Bar for breakfast.

She had reached forty-five of the fifty brushing strokes she regularly gave to her hair each morning when Dead Pan's whistle was heard, and Kimmie poked her head out of the window to tell her that she would have toast with the coffee. Dead Pan, in a pale blue transparent oil skin with a pixie hat protector, nodded cheerfully.

"Better had," she agreed. "It's a sugarless day, today," she added sympathetically. Kimmie knew what she meant, she made a wry face.

"I won't be a sec," she said. D.P. Hockey-Marking, knowing that this meant five minutes, wisely went on in to order the breakfast at the Milk Bar. There were delicious smells of cooking emanating from Casardi's café, but of course, one simply couldn't eat there, it was revoltingly dirty even if all the Casardis' were jolly and warm and crazy—the dirt! Casardi's was nothing more nor less than a place for porters, and taxi-drivers sometimes drove in to the Court, for a steak and chips. D.P.'s mouth began to water; it was true that Casardi somehow got the best of everything, but the Milk Bar was *clean* and *modern* and that was *important*.

Kimmie tied a ribbon around her hair and looked critically at herself in the mirror over the fireplace. Her big, rather doll-like blue eyes with long lashes, surveyed the upturned nose (not too upturned, she told herself, but rather *nicely* upturned), the wide forehead and the dimple, she smiled to see the dimple come into operation (yes, she thought, it's attractive). Her smile caused her to study her teeth which, still young-looking, slanted back a little but were beautifully white. Her mouth was too big, of course, she knew that, but men's appreciation of beauty had changed, at least, that was what her mother had said, because any young man who had been taken 'home' in the inevitable discussion of Kimmie's looks, remarked upon it. Mrs. Blaxland conceded a point over it, "Yes," she would say with grudging pleasure, "it's a generous mouth." And the young men never did quite know what she meant by that.

Kimmie's lipstick was, of course, pure affectation, but it gave her an opportunity to amend her mouth, depending on the mood, and the man. She tried a series of mouths to see if Michael Dane showed any preference, that is, in his *look*. She had never dared . . . oh, my goodness! the thought made her a little bit delirious, then she frowned, remembering that she would not see him today. As D.P. Hockey-Marking had remarked, it was a sugarless day. Yes, indeed.

D.P. knew all about Kimmie's feeling for Michael; which was more than Mr. Dane did. In fact, Michael Dane hardly knew of Kimmie's existence, except that she was in one of his classes at Banderton's.

Dead Pan Mary Hockey-Marking, living a prosaic but wealthy existence at home with her people in Earl's Court, envied Kimmie her flatlet. Whenever she could think of a reasonable excuse for asking Kimmie to put her up, she did so, although it entailed periodic telephone calls to D.P. H.-M.'s mother at the end of the day's work and, again, before the girls went to bed, and a further call in the early morning, so that that generously proportioned person could be reassured that nothing fearful had befallen her daughter.

The girls were friends by reasons of contrasts, Kimmie was vivacious and D.P. was the reverse; Kimmie had a lovely complexion, D.P. had no colour in her face at all; Kimmie was ambitious, and had a positive lust for life, D.P. had no ambition whatsoever, and was seemingly always bored, nor did she envy Kimmie's popularity or success; D.P. breathed because she must, Kimmie breathed because life was an exciting, though, often, a sad affair: she had found that out at nineteen.

The only jealousy D.P. harboured, was the business of the flatlet; to be on one's own, to get away from one's parents, *to do as one liked*.

When Kimmie challenged her and asked what she would especially do if she had a flat of her own, D.P. thought about it for some time, frowned, and, finally, had to admit that she wasn't quite sure, but it was, of course, the *idea* of it . . . and that once she had obtained this utopian luxury, all sorts of wonderful ways of spending the time would present themselves to her. Kimmie's success with young men, Kimmie's good looks and pleasing personality and Kimmie's friendship with other girls did not worry the phlegmatic D.P. Compared with Kimmie, she was plain, and at first glance, rather dull, yet, in reality, she possessed an odd, even intriguing personality, as people discovered when they knew her more intimately. Her sense of humour was very dry and very plentiful, and her pale white face with the over-done sloshed-on lipstick framed by her straight brunette hair, just off her shoulders, was not without fascination, but all these points had to grow on the observer. Kimmie, one accepted at once; one was not sure about her friend, at first, then, the sudden flash of a dry witticism made one look again and ponder, and then, the seemingly blasé indifference to all things, intrigued one. The students at Banderton's called her 'Dead Pan', and this became Dead Pan Hockey-Marking, never Mary, and was finally contracted to D.P. She acquired this reputation for pseudo disinterestedness by asking the tutors the most penetrating questions, without any outward vivaciousness whatsoever. Her reading of any emotional part was delivered in the same expressionless manner. As a future actress of the old school, D.P. was going to be the prize flop of the year, in fact, one wondered why the Board of Directors had not refunded Mrs. Hockey-Marking her fees and returned her daughter with a polite explanatory covering note, contents of which would be rather like the Noel Coward song *Don't put your daughter on the stage*. There were only two possible explanations as to why they did not, the first being that Banderton's liked receiving the tuition fees, the second that,

nowadays, to act on the stage was fast becoming a crime: hadn't the late Nelson Keys brilliantly summed it up, when asked by a reporter what was wrong with the Theatre, by cynically replying: "Too much acting creeping into it!" There was, after all, just a chance that any of D.P.'s completely unemotional performances, Desdemona, Lady Macbeth, Calpurnia, Lady Teazle, or Elvira in *Blithe Spirit*, might be hailed as a positive tour-de-force; she might become a star overnight, according to the new standards, though, in truth, none of the students at the Banderton would have subscribed to this view. To make matters even more ridiculous, Dead Pan Hockey-Marking did not especially want to be an actress, anyway. As one very keen young actor student had remarked: "It seems a shame to take the money." Not that the Hockey-Markings were in need of all their finance. D.P.'s father manufactured portable radio sets, and the sales of the "Marking Miniature" had increased very substantially during the war, and sets were in great demand in their utility form in the newly tenanted pre-fabricated houses. Now, their television sets were selling splendidly. Kimmie's parents, on the other hand, were inevitably slightly financially embarrassed. Kimmie's mother, Diddy, was an artist, but it was a profession which she found to be not very profitable. She occasionally drew a dust-jacket for an ovel and was fairly busy in the summer designing Christmas cards, but there was no big money to be made at such whimsies. Luff Blaxland wrote humorous pieces for the magazines, when he could be bothered to settle down, most of the time he could not. A certain amount of his source of income failed when the war started and Christmas crackers were no longer manufactured. Mr. Blaxland wrote jokes and mottoes for the cracker trade, his wife, whom he still idolised even after twenty years of Bohemian slap-dash and perpetual poverty, acted as his agent and occasionally supplemented their meagre income with chatty articles for the homier Woman's Weeklies. The Festive season was the one upon which they made money although Luff actually earned it in the balmy days of the summer. The finance from Christmas cards and cracker jokes was supplemented by the ideas Luff Blaxland submitted to the leading comic weeklies, Luff supplied the ideas and these were farmed out to the staff artists to illustrate. Luff worked, chiefly for the more modern Weekly papers. He tried very hard to crash into *Punch*, unsuccessfully, and thereafter, growled, if anyone, on hearing with interest of his quaint trade, asked if he wrote for *Punch*, replying ironically,: "Good lord! Do they *still* publish *Punch*?" It afforded him some satisfaction, in a sour-grapey sort of way. But among his serious journalistic free-lance jobs, the one that paid the most was his stories for the children's comic papers. He had never quite got to the point when he could joke about this type of work, he was always rather embarrassed that he, a middle-aged man with a grown-up daughter, actually wrote stories about men of action with jutting jaws for the adolescents and saucy seals for the kiddies, which were illustrated by other people, but he was very adept at this work; it may have been, Kimmie had tried to reason it out with D.P., because he had,

still, a childish approach to life. Kimmie's eyes had the same eager, slightly surprised look of her father's.

When Kimmie decided she wanted to be an actress, it meant that Luff had to cut his loafing down by half and Mrs. Blaxland re-doubled her trips to Fleet Street in London each week, to try and get more commissions for Luff, but it was all rather a strain. They worshipped Kimmie and anything she wanted, she had. They were thrilled that she had, of her own free will, suggested the Theatre as a career; it had been Luff's dread that she might have chosen something as deadly as his own parents, who had been "in business" and who had loved him to distraction, but frustrated his efforts to express himself in the manner in which he was happiest. Finding Diddy was Luff's luckiest day. She was trying to live her own artistic sort of life at the time, but needed a partner. They just happened to suit one another ideally . . . the Blaxlands called themselves Expressionists, they prayed that their daughter would be one, too. She was, but not in their dear sweet old-fashioned way.

Paying for Kimmie's tuition at Banderton's was the most difficult task the Blaxlands had ever attempted. They were not altogether successful; diverse uncles and aunts, to quote Luff, "had the finger put on them", in order to help the impecunious Duse-to-be. And then, after they had successfully paid all the bills for the first year, Kimmie had decided the journey to Elstree was too much for her each day, she needed a London address. Mrs. Blaxland sent her to a fashionable Women's hostel, until Kimmie explained that the chain-smoking, Eton cropped principal, an ex-officer in one of the Women's Services, had a horror of the dark, and was always suggesting that one of the girls share her room at night, then Kimmie was hurriedly installed in the minute flat in Armynter Court. Mrs. Blaxland had heard of its vacancy while attempting to persuade a 'contact' of her husband's that Luff could suggest just the sort of joke that would give this Christmas cracker that extra wit the others had not got.

Kimmie had enjoyed fitting up the flat, taking a chair from her own room at Elstree, borrowing a bed from an aunt, a book case from a colleague at Banderton's and buying a bargain at this second-hand store, and another at that, with the result that nothing matched and everything looked faded until Kimmie, ably abetted by Diddy Blaxland (and not so ably by D.P. Hockey-Marking), painted everything that she could with cream-coloured paint, which brightened the place no end. "Even," as D.P. remarked in her customary expressionless manner, "if it does look like the lavatory at Banderton's!"

"And," added Kimmie, to share the responsibility for the remark, as she saw her mother showing obvious signs of disapproval at this, "the dramatic instruction may not be good at Banderton's, but the wash-rooms certainly are!"

"Thank heavens for that!" her mother added, with too much fervour, brought on, no doubt, by her desire to draw to an end a conversation bordering upon a subject that was hardly lady-like; for Diddy Blaxland was the sort of Bohemian who liked to get her toes wet, but would have

been very embarrassed at going-in up to her knees . . . in short, she *played* at being artistic, which may have accounted for the impecunious state of the Blaxland ménage, because Luff, in his turn, was professionally artistic—but lazy.

When her parents became really insistent, Kimmie spent her weekends at Elstree wondering if she had remembered to turn the gas off at number 7A, or picturing some loathsome burglar breaking into the flat (though just what he would steal was debatable, he would have to be a very low-caste burglar, if there was such a social system in that mode of livelihood), or thinking of the possibility of leaving her bathroom tap on and so flooding her beloved flat and Mr. Rory Malone, the artist, in the flat below. Kimmie was indeed 'house proud' and, when she started to 'run up' some gingham curtains for her London 'home,' Mrs. Blaxland confided to her husband that their daughter would make someone a very good wife.

"Cripes!" muttered Luff who used the same expressions as he had done at school, "she's still wet behind the ears!"

Diddy ignored this as being too near the knuckle; if she had known her Kimmie was in love with Michael Dane, the London flat would, no doubt, have been shut that instant and re-let, furniture and utensils included. Diddy would have suggested to her daughter that she did not yet know her own mind, and Luff would have exclaimed "Lawks!" with the wryest of expressions. Kimmie was still a baby, to him. But the baby, wise in many ways, could have surprised her father with her knowledge of the world, but, in truth, she wished she had had more practical experience of life; times had changed, it seemed men were awfully scared of virgins, Mummie often talked a lot of about going to Daddy unsullied, no doubt with the intention of instilling the right thought into her daughter's head, but Mummie was completely out-of-touch with a post-war world. Of course, it was generally understood that the *Arts* were peopled with slightly more promiscuous persons than the other vocations but, even so, all modern youth she had met, Banderton student, or ex R.A.F. pilot, did not seem to hold the same glorified view of a good girl as Mummie did. Kimmie frowned thoughtfully. She slipped her mackintosh over her shoulders, made an endearing face at the flat, a matutinal habit she had soon acquired after she had taken possession, and clattered down the stairs.

Kimmie's flatlet faced the *Duke's Arms* at the end of the Court. She thought there was something rather mournful about a public house in the morning. One-armed Bert was polishing the brass rails on the back of the window. She called out a cheery "Good morning."

"Ah-ha!" Bert replied. Bert was quieter since he lost his arm at Arnhem, which was only natural. Priscilla at the greengrocer's was more cheerful.

"Mornin' Miss Bacall!" she yelled out. That was Priscilla's daily joke. She thought of an actress, usually a most unsuitable comparison, and chi-acked Kimmie with a new name every day as the girls passed en route to the Milk Bar.

"One day she'll run out of film stars!" D. P. once suggested.

"By then, I'll be one myself" Kimmie countered.

"And we'll take over Armynter Court Mansions!" D. P. added, looking across at the luxury flats in the other corner, by the archway, leading to the main street. "That's the life" she added, as if the burden of the working classes was upon her slim shoulders, "I don't suppose any of them get up before mid-day. Capitalists!" Dead Pan Hockey-Marking sniffed.

The Milk Bar was pleasant in the early morning because few people came in for an early breakfast. Only Mr. Brember, the yacht man, was in the corner, studiously not yet seeing them, later he would affect surprise and greet them when he left. Min, the woman on the early shift, was cool and clean then, she became a bit 'steamed up' (as the girls put it) later in the day. Min was nice. Her beautiful set of teeth smiled a lovely welcome. Kimmie invariably found them fascinating, but more especially the vivid pinkness of the 'gums'. Never could anyone conceivably have such resplendently pink gums; the dentist who had designed the plate was quite obviously colour-blind. Or he had, as if delighted with the colour, made it too large, so that Min's teeth started much too late in her mouth, she never really could open it very wide because of this, but if it gave her any inconvenience she never showed it. She was obviously proud of her set. She would have been horrified if she had known that Kimmie and D.P. found fun in it.

"Morning dears! What'll it be?" Min smiled, giving them the full benefit of the set. Min studied Hollywood Milk Bar scenes with great avidity. "What'll it be?" was her latest acquisition. She had not the sauce to add 'folks' which the boy (working his way through college) had done in the last film drug store scene she had seen. Not, at any rate to the girls, but she would add 'folks', later on in the day, when she thought she could 'get away with it'.

Whilst the girls were sipping their coffee, Mr. Brember, the yacht man, paid for his breakfast and, coughing nervously, bid them a shy good morning. They were able to reply politely before breaking into giggles. Mr. Brember, tall, lean, bald-headed with a very red nose and a prominent Adam's apple, worked as a clerk in the City. All the week he was a nonentity but, on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, Mr. Brember really lived. Mr. Brember sailed a toy yacht on the Round Pond, Kensington Gardens. The girls had been up to see him at it; they would not believe that Mr. Brember was not the solicitous shepherd of a nautically-minded nephew; but it transpired that Mr. Brember sailed *his* yacht. There was no nephew. The yacht belonged to Mr. Brember and it was a splendid one. Rain or shine, winter or summer, he sailed it on the Round Pond, and Mr. Brember's face at week-ends was quite different; Mr. Brember became a *person* . . . but the girls could not help sniggering because, having seen Mr. Brember rushing briskly round the pond edge, bamboo pole in hand, pride in his eye, a Commander's oak-leafed cap mentally concealing the shiny

dome of his head, they could not forget his highly worn 'half-mast' trousers. They considered Mr. Brember 'a kerrickter'.

By the time the girls had had their breakfast in the Milk Bar, the Court was beginning to come to life. Kimmie mused with enjoyment over the way in which, daily, Armynter Court 'got on' with its own existence—it was a compact little planet all of its own, people lived there, people loved and hated and perhaps even cried a bit there (she put that in for her own satisfaction, being in love was a frightfully glum affair, poets notwithstanding). Armynter Court was just a cog in a big, ticking London, but it was *her* cog and no one else in Armynter Court was as fascinated by it as she.

"You got 'em this morning because it's a sugarless day?" Dead Pan enquired.

"No, D.P. I was just thinking."

"Awfully early to have to do that, isn't it?"

"Come on, or we'll be late!"

They clattered past Max the hairdresser. Max paused in the act of shaving his first customer, and waved a shaving brush thick with cream-like soap on it. Max was a dark-skinned little man with thick oily black hair, flashing teeth with a number of gold fillings, and side-whiskers which, Dead Pan Hockey-Marking said, were 'seditious'. He was good natured, lecherous and quite harmless.

"Proper little bitch!" Max confided in his customer, who desperately rolled his eyes in Kimmie's direction in a vain attempt to see if he agreed with Max. Any compliment when the two girls were together was automatically in the singular; you found no beauty in D.P. Hockey-Marking, unless your outlook was somewhat abnormal. Max's description of Kimmie was his idea of a compliment. All young women of the presentable kind were 'proper little bitches', those that were at all 'spunky.' All women of easy virtue were 'ground-sheets.' Max knew that Kimmie was a nice girl, that still made her a 'proper little bitch', he also knew that there was 'nothing doing', but he liked to think of the idea.

Maxie was a kindly little man, his shop, if the one barber's chair and the stool for the next customer, a cash register and a shelf or two, could be classified as a shop, also stocked cigarettes and chocolate. Max especially liked children. "Nothing like kiddies," he would say when he winked at one of the Terry boys and agreed to a Mars Bar being taken off on tick. "Muvver says pay you when she comes rahnd". The Terry boys lived just outside the Court but had been schooled to come in and play there because it was safer than Jermyn Street with its traffic—and policemen. Maxie was a strange mixture. He knew it, too. Sometimes he wanted to have lots of wonderful women just to fool around with, he especially felt like this when he'd popped in to see a non-stop show; at others, he felt that to be married to a 'proper little bitch' like Kimmie and have a lot of kids was the real joy; and at other times he thought if a person like Kimmie could be fooled around with . . . hell! he had a complex. He knew it. It was a complex. He

sighed, breathing heavily on to the face of the man he was shaving. He had been on the beer a bit the previous night and was a bit livery this morning. The customer tried not to flinch as the blast of the stale beer was breathed over him.

Mr. Rory Malone also suffered from a complex. As Kimmie and D.P. walked through the arch, out of Armynter Court into Jermyn Street, young Mr. Malone watched them go. He knew where they were going from little scraps of neighbours' conversation picked up in the *Duke's Arms*, or, sometimes by sitting at the Milk Bar near them, and from parts of their conversations on the landing above while Kimmie unlocked her front door whilst he, on the floor below, having watched their return, from his window, would rush to the stairway to listen to them. He longed to paint her. He had attempted it, many times, but always 'from memory,' never with her as model. How to paint her, in what mood, in what setting? A glimpse of her as she shyly took in the morning milk, a fair flower, young, vivacious . . . to paint my love! *She walks in beauty*, that would be the title. No! She would not be walking, she would be in a bathing pool, a lake, rather, a natural background was important, and she would be swimming! No! She would be waist-deep in the water, there would be little flashes as the morning sun caught her wet shoulders, her hair back-lighted, honey-flecked with gold. On her face the look she had given him when he had surprised her as she, pyjamaed and absurdly young, looked up, milk bottle in hand, realising that she had been seen . . . a painting like *September Morn*. No; a painting that was of a younger woman, almost a girl, a starry-eyed fresh delightfully-naive young lady, *portrait of a young lady surprised at her toilet*. Yes, that was it! Her eyes would be fun to do, and the way the body slightly tilted forward made her—*Hell! Rory Malone, you toad, you dirty lousy snake-in-the-grass! And where do you come in the painting? Are you the slimy worm who has surprised her? . . . she walks in beauty. . . .* The girls hurried away in the rain. *She walks in beauty—bah! She's just rushed out like a young elephant with her pallid-faced chum!* Young elephant? The grace of a ballet dancer, as ethereal as a butterfly is my darling. Kimmie is my darling. Fain would I kiss my Kimmie's leg—as white and hairless as an egg! Her legs—strong and shapely! Bah! You, mad one, you! . . . you're worse than poor weak-minded Arthur who stands in perplexity many days, wondering where he is going, what he is supposed to be doing. Weak-minded Arthur; they should call you weak-minded Rory! Better still, lecherous Rory, Yes—you desire that lovely young girl, you rotten vulgar mess, you! You libertine, you! Low, low as low as they come. You wrong yourself—you love her? Nonsense! Paint her? My foot! You want to paw her. All Right, yes; you do want to paint her, a self-inflicted torture, to feast your eyes on her innate glory, to say inwardly, later, my beauty, later . . . you, you loathsome swine! Get back to painting, not sex! Oh, God, let me have my thoughts the way I want them!

Look at the effect of the rain on the tiled roof opposite—the tiles are white with black edges and there, where the shadow is cast by the

chimneys, the pattern is oddly reversed, the tiles are black with white edges. Some people would say that the shadows were blue, kidding themselves, *just like you are kidding yourself over Kimmie Blaxland, She is not for you!* The shadows would have blue and brown in them, naturally, but the black was predominating . . . the whiteness of the water-washed tiles or were they grey-blue? My eyes aren't true in the morning. *Too many trips to the Duke's Arms; you'll get paunchy and bleary—has she ever looked at you even when you are at your best?* In heaven's name, then, what will she see in you when you are beery and swollen with the stuff, hollow-eyed and all jangly with nerves? Go to the *Sword and Pistol*, that will give you a walk at any rate, don't hang about the Court, what do you expect; that she will trip into the Saloon Bar and nod a greeting to you, and Queenie, as if by tacit arrangement, will produce two small glasses? . . . Flarf, the Commercial, stopping in the middle of his conversation, to express mild astonishment, Flarf with his "Stone me!" after you had gone out. Oh, you were going out after you had had your drink together, you and Kimmie, eh? To paint? At ten at night? You were going to show her your paintings? Now don't make us laugh, Old Man. Why that one was getting to be part of the Music Hall comics' repertoire, jokes about etchings were now as established as ones about Mothers-in-law. What was *her* mother like? Mother-in-law, to be, one day . . . Oh, so your intentions were strictly honourable, of course? I apologise, old fellow, I thought you were trying to get that young girl up to your flat, my apologies . . . all right, so you leave the *Duke's Arms* and the nodding and the whispering has started before you are out of the swing doors . . . Queenie's smirk and "Yes, I shouldn't wonder!" and Flarf's "Stone me!" and Mr. Brember's nervous cough . . . you both walk across the Court, where poor Weak-minded Arthur at the lamp-post, is trying, in perplexity, to decide whether he wants a drink or a walk . . . you walk up the stairs, stairs that creaked in ecstasy at her touch. *Creaked in ecstasy, you daft fool, you! Those stairs creaked because they were old, and that V1 bomb just off Jermyn Street did not help either . . . ecstasy, huh!* All right, laugh at me but I don't mind. You have your love to keep you warm. Don't vilify my lady! You're a yell! Go on—where are you now? You have opened the flat door; doesn't she mind the smell of cooking, the stink of turps, the chopped onion and the opened tin of beans savouring the air? She, like you, is above such mundane matters? Oh *Rory, Rory!* Go on, then . . . you take her coat, Aha! It is still raining, then? Is this perchance a reason for you to approach her? Must she be wearing a coat? You take it from her shoulders . . . the light from the street lamp gives the room a soft kindly glow . . . So you plan to show her your paintings by street light, eh? Well, that, at least, is original, *Rory-boy!* Standing behind her, the lamp gleaming on her hair, the colour of the cornfield, ripening in the sun. (Just now you were going to paint it honey-coloured. It's probably treacle-coloured, really.) This is a chit of a girl. You are infatuated because she is about eighteen and you, you evil-minded stoat, are

thirty-six. Can't you see, Rory Malone, can't you see? I see her and I am with her and she turns, her young body taut and beautiful beneath her dress . . . stop it man! stop it! You're achieving nothing in your mental anguish. Read Freud, borrow Stekel, go into Jermyn Street and pick up a nice young lady; get hold of a young one and get rid of this fantastic complex. You lust after a young girl! I should not be allowed to paint any more. If there was a God he would wither my right hand at my obscene thoughts. I must not go into the Duke's Arms—listening for any scraps of talk about her; they like her in the Court, don't they? They call her "Our Kimmie". One day they would call her Rory's Kimmie? No—dreamy, vaporous stuff—as fantastic as any mirage . . . she walks in beauty . . . Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely . . . Thy two breasts are like two young roses that are twins, which feed among the lilies . . . oh nuts Rory! Nuts! She is not for you . . . seeing yourself taking her up to see your paintings. Visualising her mother as your mother-in-law! . . . That's a good mother-in-law joke.

What were her parents like? Life was dull and empty the week-ends she went home. Somewhere in the country she went. Did she ride? The fawn jodphurs caressed her limbs, a smart burnt-umber riding coat, perhaps, with a little Henry Heath felt hat, nigger brown? A groom holding the horse's bridle whilst she mounted. Her father, grey haired, distinguished . . . *and you, you crazy Irishman, what are you wearing, a pink coat? Don't tell me the family retainers have found you a pink coat? That's the biggest laugh you have handed me! And it fits! You rogue, you! You spaldeen! So it's riding to hounds with her, is it? It's heir to the Blaxland millions. Dear, oh dear!*

Walking on Sundays when she's not in town, roaming the deserted streets, thinking of her, wondering what she is doing, where she is, picturing her, seeing her, mentally going through the day at her side, and, Sunday night, the agony of waiting (*you love it, you masochist, you!*). Waiting for her return. You have the flat door open and the light on, in case, as she passes she catches a glimpse of 'Urchins in Green Park'. '*Catches a glimpse*'—that's good, *seeing that you deliberately placed it so that she would see it.* . . . Then, later, wondering if she is home, you say good night to Queenie, walk slowly up the stairs, and hope . . . hope . . . that she would be there, in your room, waiting for you . . . no need for words, she has suddenly realised that she loves you . . . she is in your arms, that lovely young mouth searching feverishly for yours . . . that lovely young thing, my lovely, lovely Kimmie . . . *oh, come off it, what is this, something from a skivvy's weekly? You're a creative artist, me bonny bucko, are there no other adjectives for describing the Light of Your Life? What about a bit more of Solomon's Song; or was that bit just the bit you know. Trust you to know a bit with sex in it! You're sex mad, mad! Sex ruddy mad! Pack up! Go away!*

Leave Armynter Court, I would be crazy! Armynter Court teems with characters, with scenes simply screaming to be put on to canvas.

O.K. put 'em on canvas! I intend to; that's why I remain here. *I suppose you're just getting atmosphere, eh, Rory? You noble-minded contentious liar, you!* There's paintable material at Armynter Court, I tell you . . . all the characters who live here—a series of heads and shoulders—Kid Cato, the betting-slip man, for instance, with the careful parting in the centre of his thick hair and the eyebrows like a racing cyclist's handle-bars, the ferrety little eyes and the thick mouth with the cigar butt, Yankee gangster style, inevitably in it. The Sid Fields shoulders and the Old Etonian tie, a nice touch that . . . the old firm, Kid Cato, running like a two year old through the Arch one day, straight through the Milk Bar, and out the back door with the police in hot pursuit—real movie stuff. Kid Cato—now there's a chance for a portrait. *Well, when is he going to sit for you?* Don't be silly, have you ever seen Kid Cato still for a moment, even when he's taking bets, he's always on the move, sometimes he would stand with a bike, ready for a speedy take-off . . . that wouldn't be a bad picture, dark Maxie from the kiosk, snippers in hand, dirty once-white coat, perhaps weak-minded Arthur in the background, the front of the Milk Bar; no, the *Duke's Arms* would be more colourful or the front of Gabriele Casardi's dingy little café, or a nice full figure of poor faded Mrs. Starling, sitting in dignified silence in the *Duke's Arms* sipping her single port on a Saturday night, trying to pretend she can't hear the lyrics of Ginger Garner, the ex-Commando boy, a bit beered-up and cheerful since he came through the Walcheren business. Mrs. Starling, still trying to pretend she works for the de Raynors, still trying to hold on to a lost world. The tablecloth of fortune is being whisked off and there is poor old Mrs. Starling clinging madly to the edge of it, hat askew and eyes showing fear, but holding on like grim death . . . the de Raynors are no longer rich, Mrs. Starling, and times have changed; Mr. Michael was lost on the Normandy beaches and Mrs. de Raynor had died. There was no job for Mrs. Starling, but Mr. Peter came to see her once every three months. Mrs. Starling's face told a story. *All right, when do you start painting Mrs. Starling?* Well, you have to become friendly with people before you can suddenly ask them to sit for a portrait? *Oh yes? Since when, Rory Malone?* *In the words of the war, you have to fraternise, is that it, Rory; do you have to fraternise, by chance?* *Would you say you had to fraternise with Kimmie Blaxland before you painted her?* *Oh you're wonderful, Rory Malone, wonderful!* Kid Cato and Mrs. Starling; two you haven't painted. And others? There must be quite a few at Armynter Court you want to paint. That's why you want to stay, isn't it? It's colourful at Armynter Court. What about Mr. Brember?

Yes, I'd like to paint Mr. Brember with his domed head, the absurd little trousers showing thick purple socks with their wrinkly and fat bulges, because Mr. Brember does not wear sock suspenders on account of varicose veins, most likely. Leave Armynter Court when there's Flarfy the Commercial, fat and foolish, a face like one of his vacuum cleaners (or was it lamp shades he sold?) leaning over the bar to tell Queenie a new one (*Well, have you painted that yet?*). Leave Armynter

Court when you could sit for hours watching the Terry boys trying to swipe a packet of Woodbines from Max's kiosk? Maxie clipping away at a customer's hair, talking smart-talk and the Terry boys, like a nicely trained patrol, easing nearer, taking advantage of every bit of cover, sneaking up to the little counter. Or the Casardis, with Gabriele running out to cuff one of his brats, what about that? The sudden shout and a fierce, voluble but completely unintelligible argument from the Casardis—they were even crazier once the father, Gabriele, was let out of the Isle of Man. ('Me a fascist—they locka me up—me!—a kin'ly soul 'as nevaire seen a fascist—me, warlike? Is-a make-a me laugh! Wot you like—nice 'am roll? 'Allo you Terry boys, what you want, cheese sandweech on tick? You wicker baskets, get to 'ell out of 'ere!')

Well, what about it, have you painted the Casardi family going off for the day on Sunday, looking as if they had won the prizes at a church bazaar run by gypsies? No, but later you will, of course. Yes, there was colour in Armynter Court . . . the way the lamp light shone on to the weak-minded Arthur's drooped shoulders as he fidgeted with his fingers in his mouth trying to recollect, suddenly turning, going as far as Maxie's for cigarettes, changing his plans and striding up to the other end of the Court and hesitating at the *Duke's Arms* . . . well, *have you painted him? No; you really only want to paint her!*

Nonsense. I started a rough charcoal sketch of Priscilla. Priscilla is an interesting study—'Priscilla, our Greengrocer' was the idea for it, with her tall heels and her new hair styles each week. "Like my new hair-do, Mister Malone?" Priscilla with her make-up caked on so thick that she looked as if she had just stepped out of a theatre stage door, for a breath of air. Priscilla, who was romantic enough to think an artist was an adventure and wouldn't have minded posing a bit. *Well, she wants to pose; why don't you paint her?* Do you want *me* to be candid? You know I'd never get rid of her once she came to the studio to sit. She thinks I am quite a chap, does Priscilla, why, she's even embarrassed me by whispering loudly to any casual customers, who have wandered into the Court and decided on a few things from her greengrocer's shop, that I'm artistic. "Artistic—'e paints!" It was magic to Priscilla. Priscilla who had known all types of doughboys from G.I.s to Top Sergeants, Whitechapel tailors' assistants to inebriated, not-so-particular rowing men (after the race, of course,) wanted to be loved by an artistic gentleman, who had no pretence about being one. Half my charm, of course.

So you have charm, have you, Rory Malone? Your thick curly hair badly needing a wash and a cut, and the holed polo-necked sweater and the corduroy trousers, the sandals and the old tweed jacket? Charm? Portrait of an artist; the popular conception. Self-portrait of an arrogant ass! When do we see the masterpiece? When do we see just one completed picture? God dam' you don't mock me! Who's mocking you, Rory? Just me; just your inner self; you know the little guy they superimpose on the funny film cartoons, the pious little bloke with a halo and a fatuous expression of piety? Well, that's me talking, and all I say is, let's

see one picture finished. It's the girl you want to paint, isn't it *Rory*, the girl, your lovely *Kimmie*? And others. And others? But what others—you are astute enough to see that there are people to paint in *Armynter Court* but aren't there paintable people everywhere—anywhere . . . ? on your lonely walks, the week-ends *Kimmie Blaxland* is away, the deserted London squares, *King Charles's Square* just at the back of here, for example? The crowded tea place in *St. James's Park*, or the visitors outside *Buckingham Palace*, gawking in friendly fashion, hoping, by a miracle, that the *Royal Car* will appear as they stand there, *Caledonian Market* with that gay, racy, colourful crowd, and what about the river? The pearly pink of the *Thames* some early *Sunday* dawnings, and its smoke-grey as it swirls by on foggy winter evenings . . . the three-fingered, squat, spatulate, powerful *Power House* chimneys, granite tinged brick-red at sunset . . . but you want people? Well, the laughing crowds at *Hyde Park Corner* with jeers in their eyes for the aged speaker who croakily assures them he's been "saved" or the tramps coming out of the *hostel* you saw last *Sunday*, the expressions, contempt for life, defiance, defeat, misery, hardship—draw the group, in their coats—always in their coats—rain or shine—sitting on the steps of the *hostel*, one thing the war hasn't cleared away, paint that! Or is that facing the facts, staring life in the eyes, *Rory*? You see, you don't do that; you are not honest with yourself. You are kidding yourself but not your inner self . . . sometimes you have to know that you know it's all pretence—and so I say to you again, as you look down into the rain-washed courtyard, what are you waiting for . . . ?

Leave *Five Armynter Court*—get to hell, out! Stop all these self-inflicted wounds, or see her in the right perspective—she's a fresh, jolly young girl—she probably plays a jolly-fine game of lacrosse. No, her friend of the pallid face knows about sex and is contemptuous of it, you can see that from the sudden searchlight glances in the *Milk Bar*; they must have talked about sex, *Kimmie* knows about sex . . . Well, what are you trying to say? What do you want? To seduce the girl? You'd better leave, *Rory Malone*. You haven't painted anything worthwhile since you were demobbed. You only painted one good thing before that and that was your way of expressing your fear . . . 'British armour crossing the Rhine' . . . impressionistic stuff; remember how you planned to introduce a line about official war artist into your conversation? Do you think she'd have swallowed that? *Kimmie Blaxland* is just a nice pretty young girl. In five years' time you will be looking for another *Kimmie Blaxland*; you are insatiable, you are lust itself and I loathe you! *Rory Malone*, it's me, *Rory* talking to you, you—myself—I detest you. You worship your lady! You make me sick!

Rory turned from the window and moved slowly to the sofa-bed. He fell full length on to it and the springs protested angrily. He burst into tears, stifling the sound of his crying with the pillow. His frame shook with his sobbing.

In the bus, smelling of the wet on coats and bits of fur, and the close proximity of the City's workers, *Kimmie*, strap-hanging, tried to be cheerful, even though they had not a *Michael Dane* class. Tomorrow,

they were doing the Emlyn Williams' *Corn is Green* under his tuition . . . well, a few hours to wait was not too bad. She thought of the way he seemed to light up when he talked Theatre. With all his talent, it was rather wonderful that he bothered to teach at the Banderton; but that was because he was Michael Dane, he was *big* enough to do so. Oh Michael, you're so wonderful. . . .

The 'bus lurched, skidded and bumped the standing passengers together, toes were trampled and the sitting passengers glared angrily at the ones who were standing. Dead Pan Hockey-Marking, looking, in her pixie hat, like a pantomime fairy with the stomach-ache, stared expressionlessly back at the row of males, seated in comfort by her side, remarked, in a loud voice: "Now that we're out of the A.T.S., you'd think we'd have regained our feminine status."

Kimmie giggled, a Dead Pan Hockey-Marking 'crack', she who was just eighteen and who had certainly not been called-up. The male passengers reacted according to their kind, one promptly pretended to be asleep, one blushed and turned away and a third rose awkwardly and offered D.P. his seat.

"Oh thank you, so much!" D.P. exclaimed. "It's my operation, you know. The scar's something chronic!" Deliberately she kept up an endless monologue aimed at the two men who had not moved. The journey was wretched for them. The girl was a raving lunatic, a pest, a confounded nuisance—and that was exactly what D.P. wanted to be. When the 'bus reached Kingsway, Kimmie, trying hard not to laugh outright, jumped off, followed by D.P., who, of course, took her time getting off and had to cleave her way through the people trying to get on, her look of disdain at their proximity ought to have withered them, it merely exasperated them further. "Oh, come on!" called out one of them, a red-faced woman

"Passengers off the 'bus first," D.P. reminded her icily.

"Today, not tomorrow!" snapped the woman. D.P. took her time.

"D.P. you *are* a shocker!" Kimmie said, as they cut through to Banderton's, along Catherine Street, passing the Duchess Theatre and crossing into Bow Street.

"That'll teach 'em!" D.P. replied.

"What's this new one about an operation?" Kimmie enquired.

"Got to vary the dialogue, sometimes!"

"Do you think you'll finally teach all the men in the City their manners again?"

"Manners — thing of the past — but it gives me a feeling of importance."

"You're deliberately witchy!"

Mrs. Blaxland had instilled one thing into Kimmie; the use of nicer words for nasty ones, witch, twinkle, sugar, fiddlesticks and rumps were used in place of harsher ones, and had stuck as part of Kimmie's vocabulary.

"Of course—men like it. You can't be rude enough for most men!" Kimmie immediately translated this, placing it in relationship to

Michael Dane. Of course, D.P. was quite wrong in this theory; but Kimmie did not answer.

CHAPTER TWO

BRENDA SWIFT, who lived in a luxury flat in the smart Armynter Court Mansions, the entrance to them was in the courtyard but the front apartments faced Jermyn Street, was seldom conscious of the early morning noises in the courtyard. Today, however, she was half awake, but was pretending to be asleep. She was not at her best in the early morning and by feigning sleep, she would not have to hold a conversation with Ralph. Ralph was such a noisy man, however, it was astonishing that he did not realise no one could sleep through the bumps when he hit the broad bed as he moved to and from the dressing table; the thuds as he searched for, found and dropped his shoes; the crash of the bathroom door; the gurgle of taps, turned on full, of course, and the sudden jerk of the cistern. Ralph was the proverbial bull in the china shop—the china being a near-miss to Dresden; for Brenda Swift was a creature of great beauty, but her worth and impedimenta were slightly debatable. She lay, eyes fluttering slightly, the thick long gingery eyelashes, like butterflies that would not settle, tremulous as she listened, trying not to frown. The big ox! Would he never go? Her hair, very fine tawny-chestnut, depending on the light, flowed magnificently over the pale green rumpled satin-covered pillow. The pastel colour of the pillow and the silken sheets to match, were a dream come true, a perfect contrast, hair and material. Ralph always said a woman's hair was her crowning glory. Ralph had a number of these observations in the back of his crinkly-haired skull, relics of boyhood days, shades of songs my mother taught me, and all that. He produced them with all the pompous seriousness of a City conference. He was so good at selling them that you forgot how corny they were. Would he *never* go? The flat was too small, of course, but Ralph would not move. Brenda knew only too well why he had chosen it. The entrance in the tatty courtyard, that was its big drawback to Brenda, and most of the other flat owners—to Ralph that was its chief asset—it was *discreet*. A man could make a discreet arrival and departure, no questions asked, mum's the word and all that. The world need not know. The world—or rather, Ralph's segment of it, did know, of course, that she was Ralph Checker's girl friend. They spent a fair amount of his leisure time together, especially on parties. Ralph was always entertaining people, that was part of his business. He was London Manager for the United States Barney's Butter Scotch. He was a burly great man with twinkling little elephant-like eyes, curly black hair and a rather pudgy sort of face. He was a go-getter and, although the kind of man who is always over-weight, he was in good condition for his forty years. He often talked of Melbourne, and sometimes of Canada. His nationality was

liable to a sudden switch—depending on the guests at dinner. They never dined 'at home'. Ralph really lived at Westcliff and Brenda had heard that he had a wife and two children there, but she had never pursued this line of enquiry; as Ralph would say, least said, soonest mended. When Ralph had first paid her the compliment of his attention, she was in non-stop revue. She spent most of her time looking bored as a Showgirl: what she showed, the audience liked, but that was not Brenda's idea of living. One of the other girls had all the gen on Mr. Checker. "Quite a man, a bit 'corny,' if you're looking for someone rather stylish—like David Niven, for instance, but he has what it takes, of course!"

"That depends what you mean by what it takes."

"Suit yourself, dear, he's got lots of most things."

"How did you find him?"

"Met him on a party at the Embassy one night, if I hadn't met my Ted, I might have been interested."

"Did he like you then?"

"Well, he did suggest a date."

"What's his line?"

"The usual—his wife doesn't understand him."

"I meant, what's his job?"

"Oh, what's he *worth*? Don't laugh, he's the big shot with Barney's Butter Scotch!"

"Never heard of it!"

"Yes you have. There was plenty of it about when the Yanks were here."

It was only later, turning over in her mind whether she should write and thank Mr. Checker for his lovely roses, or simply pay no regard, that Brenda wondered why the Americans should make butter scotch; the trouble was she had no one she could really ask; well, those sort of questions, at any rate. Brenda Swift lived in a lugubrious Long Acre flat, with her people. Her father worked in Covent Garden Market and her mother worked as a Wardrobe Mistress at the Archway Theatre. There was no future in *that*, Brenda found out. "With your looks you ought to be in the picthers!" Mrs. Swift had often remarked. Ma Swift was a good soul, but rather loud; living in Long Acre with that perisher, her father, had made Brenda's mother rather hard. "I want to see you get on, my gel!" Ma had said. "Don't worry, I will!" Brenda told her. "O.K. but don't cheapen yourself." The joke was that Dad, the basket, was the one who was indignant when she got a job in non-stop. "Showing yerself orf like a bit o' merchindise! Cor! s'truth! Me wife 'angs up actors' coats and me dor'er undresses for money!"

"Don't be soft, Dad, she stands mo'shun'lis, it's art when you don't move!" Ma explained.

"Art or arse?"

"Now yore bein' volgar!"

"I'm being volgar—that's 'ot! That's a good 'un—'oo's standin' up

there with nuffing on? Fine blinkin' family I brought up! 'What's your daughter doin', Fred?' 'Oh she's one of them tarts up at the Frivolyt, you can see all she's got for fruppence!'"

"Fred Swift!"

"Oh, —— off!"

Yes, the old man had taken it badly, but she did not mind. There was no future at home. Brenda wanted a future, and the Frivolyt was just a start. Being a Showgirl was better than being an overworked chorus girl with lots of tricky routines to learn, besides, she was too tall, and her hair looked smashing for a Showgirl, so the producer said. It was a fact often confirmed by Bart, the American Colonel who used to ask her to take her hair down so that he could stroke it. Looking back, it seemed like a pretty cute idea, it was such a nuisance to have to put it up again. How the girls joked about her long hair. "They'll soon lop that lot off when they get you in to the ATS". "Remember what happened to Samson, Brenda!" "I bet Brenda looks *quite ordinary* with her hair short." And so on.

Ralph was furious about the Colonel; it was the Colonel who suggested that Brenda need not go to the Non-stop, he could fix her a job with the Yanks. Wasn't he at Shaef? (For a long time she thought Shaef was his buddy; he was always talking to Shaef!) No, he couldn't guarantee a uniform, but they did want hostesses at the Red Cross Clubs. Certainly it was a war job, naturally it would avoid call-up. Brenda had no desire to be told what to do by a sexless WAAF sergeant or a buxom Wren officer, no thank you very much, no matter how patriotic she was that wasn't going to be *her* war work! There had been too much barrack-room discipline at Long Acre and the producer at the Frivolyt behaved like Hitler's deputy. A nice job at a Yankee club was just right. It was a pity about the uniform; she would have looked nice in a cream-coloured skirt and the little khaki forage cap would set off her hair a treat. But, it could not be helped, it was a war job and the Ministry of Labour people would leave her alone, at last. They had been positively insulting: a gaunt old hay bag with fierce eyes, aristocratically lidded, peered down her nose at Brenda, looking like a race horse with a pain in its stomach. Not a bit *common*, which you would expect of Labour. "Well, and what are you doing for England?" the gaunt hay bag had said, coming to the point which made Brenda's heart thump. Brenda felt like blurting out: "Standing nude with a Union Jack round my middle" but realised in time that this was no place for any crushing retorts. The Ministry of Labour were being very sticky, very sticky indeed. It was grossly unfair; one of the girls had a sister who was with the Imperial Ballet Company, all they had to do was six weeks with Ensa; "My dear we went by air *everywhere* and, of course, stayed at the best hotels, you see, we were really for officers!" The gaunt old hay bag at the Ministry suggested that the work at the Frivolyt was not of "national importance". She had never heard of entertainment for the troops, apparently. "There is adequate entertainment for the troops," she said. Brenda could imagine her idea of

that; a lantern slide show mid-week and buns and weak lemonade on Saturdays! When Brenda had suggested that the Frivolty shows were a good thing because they kept people cheerful and looked after morale, the gaunt hay bag replied that *her* morale was high enough and *she* did not have to go to the Frivolty. Brenda felt like saying that the Ministry of Labour was nothing but a class distinction machine. The Colonel's intervention came at the right time. Brenda stepped out of the Frivolty just as two of the chorus girls were seized; one became a telephone operator with the Fire Service ("They would choose Peggy—she's got adenoids and a raging cockney accent!") and the other an ACW2.

But the Colonel's powers were not as great as he would have had Brenda believe, there were questions and more visits to the Ministry and life was pretty beastly because one was never quite sure when one was going to find oneself out of the Club and into a horrid little barracks saluting everyone in sight. Then, too, the Colonel was a little on the jealous side; after all, there were bound to be men around a girl when she was a Club hostess. And, when the Invasion happened he was liable to find himself in Paris. Also, by now, Ralph Checker was becoming increasingly attentive, and more furious about the flat on Park Lane when he found out, as he suspected all along, that it was not exactly hers. The switch to Armynter Court Mansions had been quite delicately done; it was curious how such a clumsy man as Ralph could be quite subtle. Then there was the matter of her call-up. It seemed that one of Ralph's best friends owned the Alinson Tent and Associated Outdoor Equipment Company in Highgate. The factory had turned over to war work and they needed girls there badly, and so *that* was fixed. It was frightfully boring work at the factory, the monotony of the job and the awful girls (*much* worse than the chorus of the non-stop) and the way the manager leered as if to say *he* knew it was a bit of a carve-up, all made it very unpleasant. The only good thing about it was that a car took her there in the morning and called for her at night. She never enquired about the car. It may have been one of Ralph's. An elderly chauffeur, who never spoke, waited in the Court, touched his cap at her and drove her to the factory; touched his cap and drove off again; was there at night to take her back to the flat. The flat was very nice and Ralph was able to find a place where they supplied material for curtains and so on, without coupons. The raids were a bit of a nuisance, but it was better to be living fairly comfortably in London in the blitz than marching round a parade ground in North Wales.

When peace came, there she was, at Armynter Court Mansions, in a luxury flat, a member of all the better night clubs, with a banking account and a good wardrobe. She was, she admitted to herself, just a bit 'camp' when she was at the Frivolty, but she knew what she wanted, she wanted comfort and she wanted to get on. A flat at Armynter Court Mansions, even if the entrance was at the side in a mucky little courtyard, was *progress*. In six years she had done rather well for herself, but recently there had been something nagging at the back of her mind, something that had not yet come up to the foreground. She

often thought of her mind as being like the surface of the sea. Now and then she was conscious of objects moving below that surface and then, suddenly, when they were ready, they bobbed to the top and she realised what it was she had had there—a not-yet-formed idea. There had been one there moving around for some time, she rather wished that it would bob on to the top of the water *now*. She realised that her present irritability was caused by its presence there, *she wanted to know what she wanted*. Ralph had told her he planned to give her a car, now that "things were easier". Ralph had also got his eye on a nice house in the Marlow district. Ralph talked of the possibility of little trips to Brussels, a trip in connection with a link-up with the Butter Scotch Mid-European representative. A trip on which it might be possible for Brenda to go along—"confidential secretary or something"—she liked the confidential, that amused her. Ralph was still keen, that was *her* cleverness. Sometimes she wondered how she had come to be so clever; Ma and Dad were not exactly intellectual. Perhaps it was intuition, instinct. Ralph was still keen because she made sure he did not *live* at the flat. Sometimes he did stay, of course, until he went to work next morning but usually she was able to hustle him out late in the evening or early in the morning, working cunningly on his desire for secrecy. On this occasion, Ralph had been a little tight and insisted on staying, usually he "paid her visits". That was her arrangement. Ralph did not like it, but it worked very well, even if he did not understand the wisdom of it. What Ralph did not know was that he could never be permanent with Brenda; the territory was simply mandated for the time being. Ralph was an end to a means, though, just what the goal was, Brenda herself could not yet be sure . . . perhaps that's why there was a dark object floating beneath the surface of the subconscious. "A dark object floating" reminded her of her mother trying to tell fortunes out of her tea cup in Long Acre . . . Brenda pulled the silken sheet about her head as if to reassure herself that those days were past and mentally cursed Ralph, who, on pulling on his jacket, accidentally flipped one of her silver-backed hairbrushes on to the carpet. *Clumsy ass!*

Brenda wondered if he would leave her a note letting her know his plans; that was one of the snags of being mandated territory, Ralph decided that as her protector he had the right to expect his girl to be on tap whenever he called. Many fruitless evenings were spent wondering if Ralph was coming over; many dull, dreary hours were spent waiting for permission to "go ahead, you go out—I can't see you tonight" . . . and then the hurried, frantic telephone calls, usually too late, to make a date. Stuck in the flat for hours gave you the willies—there were one or two girls who were working their ticket the same way; it was as if by this bond that they immediately rang one another, then, if they were free of engagements, they would see a flick or have some food somewhere, that is, if there was not a boy in the offing. There were usually several, one of whom would be in love with them and want to marry them . . . there was a nice feeling of security about that.

It was a comfort, even though the suitor was hopelessly wrong for them. Security was there, within reach. Naturally the suitor or suitors resented the implications of a smart flat in Armynter Court or Park Lane, when they realised her set-up. That usually happened when you had to tell him you'd ring him for a date. A man liked to do the ringing up except when he had the girl on a string . . . as she lay there, musing, Brenda realised that she had never been on a string and she shivered at the prospect; she had seen too many infatuated males and several stupid girls at the non-stop who had "got it bad", that, she hoped was never for her. *Would Ralph never leave?* Go and sell your butter scotch—you clumpety great ox, you! No, that really wasn't fair of her. Ralph was a generous good-natured fellow, her Mother would call him a "soul", a good soul, Ralph, silly, stuffy and yet, with a certain strength, a definite go-getter, in an ambly sort of way . . .

As if in resentment of her mental criticisms, Ralph let the door bang as he went out. In a sudden fury Brenda beat her pale green pillow with her clenched fists . . . Blast the man! Sometimes she wondered if it was all worthwhile.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN Kimmie and Mary Dead Pan Hockey-Marking reached Broad Court at the corner of Bow Street, which was not far from the Banderton Dramatic Academy, D.P. nudged Kimmie and pointed to a forlorn boyish figure, hatless and in a very old mackintosh, with very baggy grey flannel trousers and crêpe-soled brogues.

"Note yon figure on the horizon, wouldst say that that magnificent specimen was thy lover Eustace, fair maid?" D.P. said.

"*Would-be* lover!" Kimmie replied, correcting her with an air of attempted sophistication.

"He's got it pretty badly to stand in the rain for you," D.P. remarked. "That's what I call devotion. I wonder who he is this morning?" D.P. mused. "Something from *Winterset*, I expect." Eustace liked to dramatise himself, all the time.

"Yet he *is* rather sweet," Kimmie said. She felt a warm glow inside her, it *was* nice to have men, well, boys, who were keen on you. Eustace was a poppet, it was a pity he didn't divert his attentions on to D.P. though.

"Wish I had a boy waiting in the rain for me," grumbled D.P. without any trace of jealousy. "I'd like to keep men waiting . . . it's the idea of it. I guess I'm a Circe, at heart." She paused to consider this, her pale face had a positive blanco look by the time she had applied a thick powder on to a pallid base, the vivid red of her pixie hood making the contrast more startling. "It was Circe who turned men into swine, wasn't it? I always thought she was a bit of a drip *really*." D.P. stated. "After all, it's like calling the pot black, no, not

exactly that, I mean it's—it's, well, if she'd turned the swines into men, now . . . ”

“You sound like an embittered old cynic D.P.”

“Naturally. Though I wouldn't say ‘no’ to just one juicy romance!”

The girls drew level with the bedraggled Eustace Harradine.

“‘What ails thee, knight-at-arms, alone and palely loitering?’ ”

Kimmie said.

“Believe it or not, he's waiting for a street car,” D.P. suggested.

“What?” Eustace looked at her, pretending not to comprehend.

“An American joke,” D.P. explained. “Don't you go to the movies?” He did, of course, most of his spare time.

But Eustace was shyly smiling at Kimmie. If only Kimmie knew it, the butterflies in his stomach were doing mad cavorts.

“Hallo, Eustace!”

“Hallo; Kimmie!” He was glad he had waited in the rain. He had pictured her arrival whilst he was pretending to hear the wail of steamers on the Hudson; the rattle of New York's elevated, the cry of the popcorn man. Eustace had never been out of London but he felt these things.

D.P. looked from him back to Kimmie sympathetically smiling back at him.

“If you'd like some soft music, I'll telephone for a gypsy orchestra,” she said. This set Eustace into motion, the two girls followed him. His long hair flopped against the back of his neck. Eustace would never be a star, he was too serious-minded, D.P. thought.

“I happened to be strolling this way . . . ” Eustace began.

“It being such a lovely morning for a stroll.” D.P. cut in, shaking a drip of rain off the end of her nose. Eustace frowned at her.

“Pay no regard to D.P. It's just one of those days,” Kimmie said, in order to help.

“Yes. A sugarless day to-day.” D.P. remarked meaningfully.

Kimmie blushed. She hoped that Eustace had not noticed.

“Sugarless?” Eustace did not understand. Thank goodness for that, thought Kimmie.

“Yes. A new government order—” D.P. began, deciding to turn it into a leg pull. Eustace was such a push-over for a leg-pull.

“Oh, nix on it, D.P.!” Kimmie pleaded.

“Oh, all right!”

As they approached Banderton's, they met and sometimes greeted other groups of youngsters, some suitably clad against the rain, some indifferent, all converging on Broad Court, some from Covent Garden Underground, others from Strand and Charing Cross Road 'buses, some from Holborn and others from Kingsway. They were a heterogeneous crowd, the males, teen-aged, were for the most part gawky, spotted, gangly, ugly limbed, ugly faced, awkward and clumsy; the females although born about the same time as the males were already more composed, less ungainly, more at ease with the world. There were high-spirited youngsters and there were surly ones; there were

the serious minded girls who wanted to be another Bette Davis or Vivien Leigh and there were young ladies who would die if they did not become England's première actress or Hollywood's best loved film star. Ambition flooded through Banderton's, causing great tides of anguish, excitement, envy, joy, belief, bitterness, jealousy, desire, determination and despair to wash within the minds of the students. All of these tides, buffeting young hearts, electrified the atmosphere. Charles Grafton, probably the most promising of the students, and older for his years than most of his contemporaries at Banderton's, had once said "If an atom bomb ever gets within a thousand miles of Banderton's, it's curtains!"

Harry Barlow, chubby, good-natured student, with a high-pitched laugh which he worked overtime, added "Charles is right, you can feel the tension here—waves of atmosphere, bags of it . . . all these potential stars . . . it's murder, really!"

"The sad thing is we can't all be successes," practical Eustace had added.

"Makes you think!" Harry had agreed. "Not enough grooves!" he added. Harry was a swing fan. He wore bow ties and gay clothes copied from American magazines.

Banderton's catered for the dramatic requirements of the student from sixteen to nineteen, by then, if he or she was not ready to jump into the lead at Birmingham Rep, fly to M-G-M to support Esther Williams, or take over from Margot Fonteyn halfway through *Les Sylphides*, then the Banderton tuition fees had been wasted. The Bandertons considered their schedule more modern than the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art whereas R.A.D.A. knew that they had tradition and experience behind them. There was a certain amount of rivalry between the establishments, Banderton's always attempted to hold their competitions *after* R.A.D.A., in the hope of capping them with an even more famous committee of judges and even more famous presiding Celebrity. Old Bandertonians who had reached the dizzy heights of setting up their own theatre production offices would make a passing reference to their *Alma Mater*, in the hope that job-hunting actors or actresses would say "I'm from Banderton's!" (even if some illiterate but successful presentors of the drama were inclined to sniff at "colleges to teach acting".) There had been one story handed down every year at Banderton's, the first one of its kind because Banderton's was too new to have any sort of age-old joke repertoire, of the young man, fresh from triumphs at Banderton's (a Banderton Gold Medal winner three years running) who had gone to be interviewed by an unpleasant theatrical producer of the old school, who, after hearing that the boy was from Banderton's, had exclaimed "Banderton's! Did Garrick go to school to act?" and was astounded at the reply, pithily presented: "No, perhaps that's why he was such a ham!" Naturally, a rider was added by the staff (and any conscientious student at Banderton's telling the anecdote) to the effect that relating it did not necessarily mean that the narrator agreed with the views expressed therein!

This rainy morning, as the students streamed into Great Hall for morning prayers, when the mackintoshes and capes, hoods, snoods, handkerchiefs and bandeaux were removed, a startling variety of female dress clashed sartorially with the drab and mostly shapeless tweed coats or the dark, unpressed suits of the young men. It was as if the young ladies had learned from certain male animals; they wore the plumage and some also wore the pants. In truth, D.P. Hockey-Marking had once appeared in trousers but, since she was immediately sent home to Earl's Court to change, the idea had not caught on, Mr. Benson Banderton, the principal, had seen to that. Mr. Banderton, "The Old Man", was, to quote Charles, "perfect casting for a small part of the Bishop in Act Three". When asked what play, replied "Any one". But, like most of the handsome young man's jokes, it was a little too unkind and not quite truthful. Benson Banderton's white hair, powdery-looking, gave his head a positive halo when the sun shone through the high windows behind him in the Great Hall, his cerulean eyes, the jutting chin, gave him an air of a crusader, his voice was beautiful but a little monotonous. He had achieved minor fame in Shakespeare in Canada. He combined the artistic with the practical. Mr. Banderton had Presence. Mr. Banderton was an excellent principal and, whereas it was difficult to obtain the services of the ideal teachers of the dramatic art, Mr. Banderton was able to put a very imposing team of specialist-instructors into the Thespian field, among them, of course the dynamic young producer Michael Dane.

Mr. Banderton took prayers in the Great Hall; the prayers were repeated by the pious students in the front rows, supplemented by the students who had arrived too early to stand at the back, and the last rows were able, due chiefly to the fact that the acoustics were bad and Mr. Banderton rather a benign ass, to converse freely of their efforts at the pursuit of happiness the previous evening. During this solemn matutinal conclave, good-looking Charles Grafton, cheery Harry Barlow and Eustace Harradine teamed-up with Kimmie and D.P. Hockey-Marking whenever they were able to struggle towards one another and hold their own meeting in whispers interspersed with sniggers. The Frightful Five was their self-styled nick-name. All three boys imagined themselves to be in love with Kimmie although, of course, only Charles would have denied it. Charles was the only man at Banderton's capable of verbally squashing D.P. Hocking.

"Hullo, Dead Pan, been haunting houses all night?" he snipped, scissor-like, at her. D.P. gave him a look which should have aged him, but did not. Harry Barlow, quick to notice it whispered: "You *should* be looking like the High Lama in Shan-Gri-La!" he told Charles and started to cackle. Kimmie shushed him. He missed a pause in the prayers by a few seconds. Kimmie searched the rows of instructors; of Michael Dane there was no sign. She sighed. The day was a dead loss.

"What you do last night?" Charles asked her. He was hoping that she would ask him to take her out, Charles rarely asked girls, they asked

him. So far, Kimmie had not made the gesture. In fact, she had never been aware that he expected it

"Mooched around. What did you do?"

"Went to the flicks. Took Gwen. Wish I'd worn my mac, she wept buckets!"

Eustace looked about him, one eyebrow elevated, with an air of extreme boredom.

"Who *is* Eustace today?" Harry enquired.

"Cary Grant, I think," Kimmie replied.

"Ask him," Harry requested. Kimmie nudged Eustace and he inclined his head to the question. He replied and Kimmie passed on the information to Harry.

"I'm wrong. He says he feels like William Powell."

"He looks," said the critical Charles, "like Boris Karloff!"

"Can't all be Stewart Grangers!" flipped back D.P. with a meaning look at Charles but, this time, Charles did not deign to reply.

"What did you do, Harry?" Kimmie enquired.

"As if we didn't know!" D.P. said.

"Well, I *did* have a disc session with Tommy," Harry replied defensively. Then enthused: "It was a Hoagy Carmichael evening." That should have explained everything.

"Hoagy Carmichael . . . ? Doesn't he play cricket, or something?" D.P. remarked, just to be mean.

"Very funny." Harry's usually plump face clouded over. He was very touchy about his passion for modern music. Charles began to whistle *Stardust*, very softly, just to prove to Harry that he knew all about it. This cheered Harry because he knew that Charles was really just a learner when it came to swing. Charles had never heard of Coleman Hawkins, Bix Biederbecke or Teddy Wilson. Charles really had an L on his back. These thoughts put Harry in a good mood because Charles had so much, otherwise.

Harry's swing sessions were not necessarily held in company with his partner. Sometimes the evening was spent with both parties at home, their gramophones brought near the telephone, the records arranged in a neat pile nearby. One of them would start the session off with a record, the gramophone being placed as near the mouth-piece as possible. When the recipient of the music had listened to it to the end, it was his turn to play one for the other member of the session. Once Mr. Barlow had arrived home early from a Promenade Concert and, opening the door too quickly for Harry to be able to avert disaster, had crashed the gramophone off a table, the telephone off its stand, smashed a glass bowl, scattered the flowers in it and soaked the carpet in water, broken the back of a favourite hall chair and cracked five Artie Shaw records.

Kimmie did not know the names of any of the modern composers except William Walton but when she had once talked about him to Harry in connection with swing his expression proved that she had obviously boobed. Yet what could have been more modern than

his *Spitfire Fugue*? Kimmie, therefore, thought Harry's swing mania somewhat bigoted.

Eustace would have liked swing stuff, if Kimmie had shown any preference. D.P. Hockey-Marking was all for reading a book; but she could never remember what the book was she wanted to read.

"Thank you. To your classes, please!" Mr. Banderton dismissed the students and there was a sudden spurt of chatter as they flooded into the Corridor.

"What's the programme this morning?" Charles asked, as they made for the double doors at the end of the Great Hall.

"Lecture from Bingo; 'Deportment', Miss Wentworth; 'Costume drama and the modern mind', Miss Kinsman," Eustace told him.

"Oh lor!" groaned Charles.

Kimmie thought like agreeing, but not for the same reason.

"What about this afternoon?"

"*School for Scandal*".

"Whose taking it?"

"The Old Man, I think."

"I'd rather go to the Plaza!"

"Is that the right spirit, Charles Grafton?"

"The flesh is willing but the spirit's weak, today!"

The Frightful Five reached Bingo Oliphant's classroom for their lecture, but since they had walked slowly along the passage, the back rows of seats were now filled. Kimmie made a move to join one of the front ones when Charles stopped her.

"Don't go there, we'll be just in front of that awful little Joan Davidson." He moved up another three rows, the others followed.

"What's wrong with Joan Davidson?"

"Nothing except she smells exactly like a newly opened tin of soup."

"Charles!"

"Well, it's true."

"Even her best friends won't tell her," Harry added.

"When have you opened a tin of soup?" D.P. could not resist asking.

"I feel I've always opened tins of soup," Eustace remarked sadly, and prevented Charles from answering D.P. who was pleased to see that an angry flush had appeared on his face. Eustace thought about himself opening tins of soup at an American drug store whilst Kimmie, a lovely co-ed, in a shaggy sweater and a white skirt, waited for him to heat it up for her.

"Your William Powell mood must have shifted. Bill Powell never opens cans of soup," Charles Grafton said, trying to prove he was not nettled.

"Well, he might," countered D.P. "at a hunting lodge, for instance."

"Where they *never* have a tin opener," Kimmie added.

"I think I feel more like Mischa Auer!"

"There you are!" Charles said. "I said so!"

Mr. Oliphant, Bingo to the students, entered and nodded like a

benevolent sealyham. He and the class exchanged "Good mornings!" He punctuated his speech with throat-clearing "arums".

Charles Grafton groaned.

"What?" he asked aloud. "Am I doing here? At this preparatory school! To think I might have been at the O.U.D.S!"

"The free list has been entirely suspended, Adonis," D.P. Hockey told him caustically. "In any case," she added, "If you had been old enough for Oxford, you would have been conscripted."

"Oh relax, girl, relax!" drawled Charles.

"A little attention, please." Mr. Oliphant requested.

"A little," whispered Harry, "is just what he is going to get."

Kimmie settled herself to listen with as much attention as she could muster. It was very unfair to start the day off with a lecture, one was inevitably a little drowsy and with Bingo's droney voice . . . and then the miracle happened. There was a discreet tap on the door and Michael Dane entered and went straight up and held a short conversation in an undertone with Bingo Oliphant. Kimmie leaned forward in her seat . . . *Hallo Michael. Hallo darling!* Bingo "Ohed" and "Ahed" and nodded owlishly and grunted. He turned to the class.

"The—arum—Principal wishes to confer with me. Mr. Dane will substitute. You must—arum—excuse me." He bumbled out.

Michael Dane thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and sat on the edge of the instructor's desk. He looked the class over.

"I'm seeing a number of faces I did not expect to see until tomorrow." He began.

The class laughed and began to come out of its lethargy.

"I expect we can *both* survive that!"

They laughed again.

"I don't know on what subject Mr. Oliphant was going to talk to you—I'm going to say something about *Hands*—and *what to do with them on stage*—They're usually a problem when you're nervous. That interest you?"

There was a chorus of "Yes." The class had perked up, pleased. "Dane's 'smack-on'!" Harry Barlow whispered enthusiastically, noting his brother's favourite expression, his brother was an ex-R.A.F. pilot. So was Michael Dane.

"Why does such a brilliant bloke waste time at a dump like this?" Charles Grafton muttered, pretending to blow his nose.

"Got to train another brilliant bloke to take over, I suppose." D.P. Hockey cut at him, out of the side of her mouth.

"Miss Hockey-Marking," Michael Dane suddenly said, quenchingly, "If you've come here for instruction on the art of Ventriloquism you're wasting your time on two counts, one; I can't help you and two; you seem to have mastered the art already! Now we'll have quiet."

The class was quiet. Michael talked and he held them. He talked rather quickly, a fault he was the first to pounce on in any of his pupils, but he enumerated well and he carried his listeners breathlessly along as he expounded his ideas.

So the day was not to be a dead loss, after all! Kimmie, suddenly radiant-faced, eyes wide open and sparkling, mouth slightly parted, happy, yearny happy, listened as the Oracle spoke. Dead Pan Hockey-Marking grinned and gave Kimmie's backside a little nip. Kimmie without turning smiled blissfully and nodded.

"Sugar, after all!" whispered D.P.

Kimmie looked as much as she listened, as she assimilated the knowledge he had to dispel her mind was also busy re-presenting the pleasant facts about the molecules and particles that made up Michael Dane. He was on the short side, very muscular, by no means squat—compact, rather. His face was a keen face, very alive, an animated face, very intelligent with a short nose and nice even teeth. His ears were small (delicious little ears, so important, a man's ears!) and his hair was not a bit "Theatre". It was cut short, parted and slicked back and he gave the impression, since he dressed well, of being a very alive young captain of industry or Member of Parliament; in an academy in which the desire to stress one's occupational pursuits was predominant, Michael Dane's 'ordinaryness' stood out. That he had achieved a greater success than any of the other teachers at the Banderton, added to his uniqueness. The combination of matter-of-factness with the extraordinary vigour and energy, the decisiveness and creativeness made him an admirable instructor. He was Mr. Benson Banderton's "star turn". Banderton's had been very lucky to acquire him. He was there by one of those odd twists of circumstance. Already a well-known young play producer who had worked studiously on the fringe of London's exclusive West-end citadel Michael Dane, with a series of "interesting", "startling", "unique", "revealing", "daring", out-of-town productions,—to quote the press of the time—was awaiting that sudden, chancy thing whereby the swift transfer of a stunt show in the suburbs or from one of the try-out theatres of the metropolis, was good enough to come in to the West-end and thus, sky-rocket producer, cast, author, to immediate success and act as an open sesame to the inner circle of snobbery and cliqueyness which made the membership of the West-end coterie such a desirable thing to the provincial and adolescent, whose bread and butter, from then on to be jammed or caviared according to taste, was earned in the world of the Theatre.

Because of the outbreak of war, Michael Dane just missed this, but he was on to something better. He promptly joined up in the R.A.F. and was a Battle of Britain pilot. On the famous day the R.A.F. shot down one hundred and eighty five aircraft, Pilot Officer Michael Dane bagged two. When he was resting from his first Tour of Ops, he put on a show at an R.A.F. station which was sufficiently novel (in that it was all R.A.F.) to be brought to London for two weeks. He was borrowed to stage a R.A.F. pageant at the Albert Hall, which was brilliantly executed. He returned to fighter aircraft, then fighter-bombers, and was transferred to night fighters and was shot down over France on an intruder raid. When he was released by members of General Patton's forces, he had achieved more fame with a Stalag show. This

was brought to London and was, once again, a triumph for Flight-Lieutenant Michael Dane. Gielgud gave him one of his plays to direct, which put him on the map, and he followed it with a production for Tennants, one for the Tyrone Guthrie-Laurence Olivier season and another for Linnit and Dunfee. They were all 'hits'. Michael Dane, with his new stunts, his refusal of the obvious, his ceaseless energy in his efforts to create new effects, was one of the answers to the weary dramatic critics' cry of *Where is the new talent to revive the dying Theatre?* A cry inevitably made despite the fact that the Theatre had never been so healthy or so booming.

Michael Dane, contemptuous of the talkies and of television, was essentially a man of the Theatre, a creator of flesh-and-blood shows; the sudden idol of the critics, the bright boy of the British Theatre; London's answer to Orson Welles; "Star Maker and Atom Breaker" the cheaper press head-lined him; *this rising young producer* said *The Times*; Michael Dane was the first war hero to find his feet, feet that had once had wings . . .

But his prison camp days had given him two very vital experiences which he was determined to retain—comradeship and the company of youth. He not only felt he needed them both, he felt his success depended upon them. Those were two things he had never wanted or needed before; the world suddenly became a rather better place for them, he felt. He missed them very desperately when he was first free again; the men at the camp young men mostly, "bird men", talked eagerly, keenly . . . got to keep together. People will forget. Band of brothers, stuff. And he had thought "Yes, we have got to help all these young chaps, all of us. We've found something—comradeship and the power of youth and unity . . . But, somehow, it did not quite work out that way, when the chaps got home, some forgot and others did not need help, and others could not get help and annual dinners or occasional brief meetings were no good. If his heart had not always been with the Theatre, he might have "signed on" again for another spell of service, but a life-time of service shows and 'stooging' passengers and 'crate' was not going to be the life for the energetic Michael Dane, when even to sit in an empty theatre made him feel *alive*.

Then, one day, when he was a success, he was asked to speak to all the students at Banderton's and he agreed; at the Banderton the future fodder for the stage was assembled, instructed, infused, sent out. . . . Yes; he would talk at Banderton's, and, in that one lecture, the idea was born that this was what he needed to replace the loneliness in his heart; here was comradeship, here was youth. When he asked Mr. Benson Banderton if he was in need of an extra instructor, Mr. Benson Banderton almost fell over with surprise. To "acquire" Michael Dane—to be *asked* by Michael Dane if he could join the staff—to be able to *announce* that Michael Dane was one of their instructors . . . what was the catch? Merely that Dane be allowed time off for his West-end productions. A request impossible to grant to anyone else, "But exceptions", boomed out Mr. Benson Banderton, "prove the rule, eh?"

Michael Dane joined the staff at Banderton's and, among his classes, and among the many who were in love with him, was nineteen year old Kimmie Blaxland; though, of course, the others merely had adolescent infatuations; at least that was the way Kimmie Blaxland saw it. Soon Banderton's, for Michael Dane, became more than an institution, a font of learning, a nursery for Minerva's brood. And for Kimmie Blaxland it became a temple of worship.

CHAPTER FOUR.

"WELL," said Michael Dane, glancing at his wrist watch, "that's about all I've time for today, and you'll be late for your next class if I don't stop now. Thank you for listening." He always said "Thank you for listening."

"H'm!" grunted the self-opinionated Charles Grafton. "It's a change to get someone who talks sense!"

"I feel the fees we pay here should all go to Michael Dane, then from them he could give Papa Banderton anything he felt he didn't need," suggested Harry.

Eustace said: "Very exhilarating. I feel I could walk up to Ralph Richardson and——"

"Falter!" suggested D.P. quickly.

Only Kimmie remained silent. She was hoping as they moved out to the door, Michael might say something to them . . . he made a point of talking to the students, informally, in friendly fashion, as often as he could. Vera Scott had said he went with some of them one night to the Ballet.

Kimmie walked more slowly than the others in the hope that he would see them (*and say what?* Well, she hadn't considered that! Anything would do: he hadn't said a word to her since she played Wanda in *The Morning Star*; badly, too, because she was so nervous because Michael played Cliff for some of it.)

D.P. turned back knowingly.

"Why don't you tie your shoe lace?" D.P. whispered, as a bright suggestion.

"It hasn't got a lace," Kimmie whispered back.

"Well, no one will notice," D.P. replied and turned back to keep the three boys from looking round.

Blushing foolishly, Kimmie paused and bent down to adjust a non-existent shoe lace. At that moment, Joan Davidson and a few others, moved over to Michael and engaged him in conversation. Oh fiddle! That outrageous Joan Davidson. Nothing like it! She swoops over and engages Michael in a conversation with as much aplomb as a prima donna—B.O. and all. The cheek of the girl. More in anger now, than in sorrow, Kimmie joined the others as they thronged their way down the corridor to Miss Wentworth's classroom.

"From now on," said Harry "It's going to be a long morning—a very long morning!"

D.P. looked meaningfully at Kimmie, 'any luck?' it depicted; from the flush on Kimmie's face D.P. thought that perhaps all had been well; but Kimmie shook her head negatively. D.P. made an appropriately glum face.

Miss Wentworth, who sometimes recited poetry for the B.B.C., had a lovely voice, she walked like a queen; she was tall and distinguished-looking with big dark eyes heavily lidded, deeply shadowed, she was very thin and suffered from mental anguish. She was extremely sensitive and she worried about her appearance. She spent most of her journeys on the 'bus to and from Banderton's worrying about the back of her neck. Did the person sitting behind her think it was clean? Was there any dandruff on her coat collar or any loose hairs? . . . She had a horror of such things. She was always wondering if her breath smelt, and, before her classes arrived, would slip a scented cachou into her mouth, just for safety. In bed in the morning she would cup a hand to her mouth and breathe through her mouth to try and sniff with her nose the *texture* of her breath. Miss Wentworth was very anxious to please and was always just a little frightened that one day she might get the bird (she thought of it as "horse play"). Students were such unpredictable creatures. Usually they behaved very quietly chiefly, although Miss Wentworth was not aware of this, because they all felt sorry for Miss Wentworth. "She's worse than Eustace," Harry Barlow had once remarked, "she's always playing Calpurnia".

Miss Wentworth was terribly afraid of boring her class.

"I'm not boring you?" she would ask, hastily, at the end of a rather pointless anecdote, or at the completion of an abstruse viewpoint on a sonnet. "I hope I'm not boring you?" You couldn't say *yes* to poor Miss Wentworth because you knew she would promptly curl up and die.

Miss Wentworth's deportment classes were crashingly dull, but even if Benson Banderton knew this, he also knew that certain parents required all the trimmings: Mr. Banderton was not the sort of principal who set a roast duck before a prospective diner and omitted all the gubbins.

The Frightful Five, together with their classmates, listened and watched as Miss Wentworth gave them her hints about stage stance (she pronounced it with an 'r' in it) and what to do when in repose on the stage (Miss Wentworth, of course, knew her theatrical onions) with an air of finality; there they were, by golly, so they had better breathe and bear it.

Miss Kinsman was as bad; Miss Kinsman was very rotund, she moved like an out-of-date tug in a rough sea. Her face, in her prime, was invariably described in the press as "pert"; she was jolly but too jolly and her voice boomed across her classroom. When she lectured she followed it with a "Don't you see?" She had determined to keep up-to-date and she spent a great amount of what was her leisure time,

seeing new shows, going to the cinema, trying to be invited to cocktail parties in order not to "date". She was able to convince Mr. Benson Banderton that she could handle modern subjects. This morning in her treatise *Costume drama and the Modern Mind*, Miss Kinsman knew her facts, her material was interesting but her presentation of it jarred upon the class. Her "Don't you see?" salvoed over the heads of those in the front row and disturbed the Frightful Five in the back.

"I'm simply starving, where are we going to lunch?" Kimmie whispered. There were a variety of places off Broad Court from a Lyons to Uncle Joe's where they could have a mid-day meal. Some of the students brought sandwiches.

"Let's have a meal in a decent place in the Strand," Charles suggested. It was all right for Charles, his people had money.

"Count me out!" whispered Harry Barlow, quickly. "No lunch for me."

"Why not?"

"Going to nip up to Keith Prowse—there's a new *Woody Herman* disc out today."

"When you'd rather spend your lunch money on a swing record than eat, then it really has got you!"

"I'll make up for it, tonight," Harry replied, "besides, once I've got it, just think how often I can play it—and I can only lunch once."

"What horrible logic. Let's go to Uncle Joe's, it's filthy but I'm hungry, too," said D.P. Hockey-Marking, "and at least you get a lot for your money, and well cooked, too."

"But all those hearty Covent Garden blokes—" Charles began, protestingly.

"We're going to Uncle Joe's, you can go to Simpson's or the Savoy", D.P. whispered firmly.

"I meant the café at the corner of ——"

"We're going to Uncle Joe's," D.P. repeated.

"Don't you see?" boomed out Miss Kinsman.

There was usually a rush at lunch-time because there were too many students for all the eating places in the neighbourhood; the ones who ran out first raced to the Russell Street Lyons, some of the more sophisticated young men tried the pubs for beer and sandwiches, the *Globe*, the *Prince of Wales* or the *Sun*. The Frightful Five did not attempt to hurry. Kimmie and D.P. Hockey-Marking knew that Uncle Joe's had not been 'discovered' by the others, and that its exterior was so unprepossessing that it was dubious if other students would ever venture therein. They, themselves, had only gone in, in some trepidation, when they had been caught in a last minute's afterwork discussion by Miss Wentworth one day, making them very late, and could not find a place to eat, and would not queue. Uncle Joe's was a carter's grub-shop, the tazzy little place which often housed taxi cab men who have pulled in for a snack, an occasional postman just off his rounds and several dubious tough guys from the Market; in consequence the food

was excellent. Sometimes Uncle Joe served the customers in person, a bald-headed, wrinkle-faced old man with an Old Bill moustache and a twinkling eye, he liked the two girls because they made his little café suddenly rather bright, he tolerated the boys because they brought the girls. He called the party 'my actresses' and Charles, Harry and Eustace who followed the girls in, let it go: they could never be sure if Uncle Joe was pulling their legs.

When they reached the outside of Banderton's and Harry threw them a hurried good-bye and sped off to the Covent Garden Underground, Eustace wanted them to go the long way round to Uncle Joe's so that he could read the "Missing" notices outside Bow Street Police Station.

D.P. groaned "Here we are rumbling with hunger and you want to start dramatising. We've finished Banderton's schedule for the morning, Eustace. Can't you look at them *after* lunch?" she asked.

"Oh for heaven's sake, let's humour him!" Charlie requested, hoping that if they arrived late at Uncle Joe's there would not be any room for them. They walked down to the police station and read the "Missing" notices. Eustace reading them most carefully.

"What I want to know is, who have you lost, Eustace?" D.P. enquired.

"Don't you find them fascinating?" Eustace asked Kimmie, ignoring D.P. Hockey-Marking.

"Well . . ." Kimmie hesitated, ". . . intriguing, rather."

"Yes, intriguing will do," Eustace agreed.

"I like the blanks you have to fill in," said D.P. "Just think what a wonderful parlour game you could play, like *Consequences*—Blank Found. Where blank? When blank? Particular marks on person blank? The possibilities are endless!"

"I wonder why, in case of the discovery of a body, you insert 'sex' after the 'when' ", mused Eustace.

"After you've finished being Basil Rathbone, could we please go and eat?" D.P. requested.

"Is that it, Eustace—were you feeling Sherlock Holmesy after Miss Kinsman's efforts?"

"More like *The Lodger*" suggested Charles.

"It must be fearfully exciting to be a detective," Eustace speculated.

"Look at this one!" he exclaimed. "Isn't it grim!"

"I like the 'dentures' tactfully in brackets!" said Kimmie, "don't you?"

"If we don't go to Uncle Joe's shortly, I'm going to lie on the pavement and kick my legs in the air," D.P. threatened.

"That won't do *you* any good!" Charles cut at her, quickly.

D.P. made a grimace. "Poor Charles, his mind's always on physical attraction," she stabbed back at him, then added: "I'd be taken into Bow Street and instantly fed with hot gruel, and *hot gruel would be better than nothing*, come on Eustace!"

Eustace sighed and moved reluctantly away from the notice board. They walked down towards Wellington Street.

"I'm glad Banderton's is in this neighbourhood," Kimmie said.

"If you mean they both smell, how right you are!" Charles replied. Charles was always sniping at Banderton's, Kimmie thought, it was part of his 'act'. He would have been the first to defend it against R.A.D.A. if it came to a show-down. Charles liked to be considered a cynic.

"I meant the atmosphere" Kimmie explained.

"When is a 'smell' an 'atmosphere' ?" D.P. asked.

"You know what I mean," Kimmie gestured, indicating with a sweep of her arm; "the Market and Drury Lane—"

"King Charles and Old Nell and all that," Eustace added.

"Yes. It's rather nice to think we're learning our craft just as—"

"—Nell did? Why, Kimmie!" D.P. interjected.

Even Charles laughed.

"Oh, you know what I mean!"

"Kimmie means it wouldn't have been the same if Banderton's was in a more modern quarter of London, don't you, Kimmie?" Eustace came to her rescue.

"Yes. Thank you, Eustace." She gave him a grateful look which made his morning worth while, the cold he would get, through waiting in the rain for her early that morning, was now actually worth having when it came.

"What I mean *is*—" Kimmie began again when Charles interrupted.

"Yes, what *is* it you do mean?" he asked. "This is beginning to lose its charm!"

"Well, the Opera House and the Market—"

"This is where we came in," D.P. remarked, unkindly.

"—and the places like Uncle Joe's and the men waiting for the fruit and vegetables from the country, the coster-mongers and—"

"—the stiff's lying about the Cop Shop for asses like Eustace to discover!" Charles added.

"Oh dry up, Charles! Kimmie's right, you know."

"Give me Oxford, every time!" Charles said.

"Why don't you drive up there in a car, then you could always say you went through Oxford and we could *all* relax." D.P. suggested bitingly.

"You're so dumb you think the Wallace Collection is a lot of books!" Charles snapped back.

"So you can get the Fred Allen programme on your radio, too, can you?" D.P. counter-attacked.

"Oh stow it, you two!"

"I hope Uncle Joe's got a nice steak hidden away!" Kimmie wished out loud, inwardly she was thinking 'I wish Michael Dane had asked me somewhere nice like the *Coquille* in St. Martin's Lane. He's probably sitting in the Savoy Grill with Margaret Lockwood. Oh horrors! I hope that soft-soaping little Joan Davidson hasn't persuaded him to

take her to lunch. Oh misery! He couldn't, he couldn't possibly be lunching her at the Ivy—that would be the end!"

They crowded into Uncle Joe's. It was dark and steamy within and fairly full.

"Ullo. There they are, my little actresses—come in, me beauties! Want a nice 'ot lunch off'n Uncle Joe? Right-o! 'Ave to share a table—room for four 'ere, if this gent'll just move up. Don't mind my other customers, they look like gaol birds but they've 'earts o' gold—well, rolled-gold!" Uncle Joe laughed at his own joke and it turned into a wheeze in his throat.

"I'm sure that moustache is a radio direction finder!" suggested D.P. in an undertone to Eustace.

"It's so dark in here the menu should be in Braille," suggested Charles Grafton. Uncle Joe led the way down the narrow room past customers tucking-in to Uncle's well cooked luncheon. He rubbed the seat of Kimmie's chair as if he had once been a lavatory attendant.

"There you are, me proud beauty!" he said then turned to the other occupant of the table who had moved into the corner "And thank you, sir!" Uncle Joe said, "you're a gent."

The "gent" was Michael Dane.

"Oh my goodness!" Kimmie exclaimed.

"Oh Lor'" said Charles, under his breath.

"Well I'm damned!" Eustace blurted out.

"My! My!" said D.P. Hockey-Marking.

"Hallo!" Michael Dane greeted them. "Mind if I sit at your table?"

"You mean, mind if we sit at yours?" Charles corrected him. Kimmie decided that she really did not want a steak after all.

"This" kidded Michael, "must be my lucky day—my most glamorous pupil lunching with me and my—"

"He means Kimmie!" Charles told D.P. Hockey-Marking unkindly.

"I was going to add and my most attractive," Michael retorted, smilingly.

"Sir, you flannel us," D.P. replied. "I bet you say that to all the students!"

"Well, nearly all!" Michael compromised with a grin.

"At least, you didn't say your most promising!" Kimmie said. How simply marvellous that he should be here at Uncle Joe's—the second nice thing that had happened today. "Do you often come here?"

"No. Now and then—must see life to understand the Drama—or have I got that the wrong way round?"

He was easy with them; not at all difficult to get along with, he was one of them in that he instantly struck a bond of friendship with them, yet, too, they were able to respect him. Even Charles, who had resented meeting him at Uncle Joe's because he made for competition over Kimmie, (Eustace didn't count in Charles's estimation), could not help liking him.

When Uncle Joe came to take their order, Michael was making them laugh about a revue sketch he had "got away with" in his prisoner-

of-war camp, which completely pulled the legs of their guards, the Germans could not understand why the scene was such a success with the British airmen.

"So you soon made chums!" Uncle Joe exclaimed.

"We're old friends," Michael replied.

"There's a nice bit o' bacon for 'specials', if you understand me." Uncle Joe winked affably and gave his moustache a chuff with the index finger of his right hand.

"I vote we leave it to Uncle Joe," suggested Eustace who had been very quiet, upset in his way that Michael was present and able to dazzle Kimmie so easily. Kimmie was such a sweet child she did not realise that all Banderton's knew that she was mad about Michael Dane.

"Right-o, guv'nor. Leave it to yer Uncle!" Uncle Joe winked again very solemnly, giving the party an individual scrutiny and added: "I'll find yer some pink mice! 'Ullo!" He turned as the little café door bell 'ting-ed', "'oo'ave we drawn *this* time?" A squat but big-shouldered, cloth-capped Covent Garden porter came in, his nose broken some years ago but never set, one cauliflower ear and a fierce expression.

"Cor blimey, it's Cinderella!" Uncle Joe remarked, going forward to greet the newcomer.

The others laughed.

"I'd like to introduce him to our Mr. Casardi!" Kimmie said to Michael.

"And who is your Mr. Casardi?"

"Mr. Casardi owns a rather similar little café—but much dirtier—in our Court, he—"

"And where's 'our court'?"

"Armynter. He—"

"And where's Armynter Court?"

"Off Jermyn Street."

"Which end?" Michael persisted.

"You can come and dine there at Casardi's with us," D.P. suggested, taking advantage of the way the conversation was going.

"Good idea, I will!" Michael replied and added: "Do you live there, too?"

D.P. refraining from saying: "Don't worry, I don't," replied: "I sometimes stay the night with Kimmie—so many wolves in the Big City," D.P. explained, expressionlessly. Kimmie frowned at her.

Michael laughed. "You being pretty adept at keeping them at bay?"

"Keeping them at bay—Dead Pan goes right out and chases *them*!" Charles could not help adding.

D.P. glared at him.

"If you don't feel at least ten years older after that look she gave you—" Eustace began.

"You've been awfully quiet, Eustace," Kimmie said. She hoped Eustace was not going to sulk for days because of Michael. Michael actually sitting there with them, lunching with them. And she had

thought he was with Joan Davidson! Well this was something Joan Davidson would hear about with envy.

"I feel a bit like Franchot Tone trying to get a break when I come to Uncle's" Eustace confessed. They laughed, Michael turned back to Kimmie.

"You were telling me about Mr. Cas— something" he reminded her.

"Before you so rudely interrupted me" Kimmie added.

"Before I so rudely interrupted you."

"Well, he has to be seen to be believed—what I mean is—he's very excitable, er—volatile and Uncle Joe's so—er—British—"

"Phlegmatic!" Charles added, for her.

"Yes, phlegmatic, thank you, Charles."

"Charles obviously should be taking a D.Lit. at Oxford instead of wasting his talents at Banderton's," Michael at once remarked.

Charles flushed quickly resenting an implication that was not meant.

"Meaning that I am more suited to Oxford?"

"Not at all, meaning that Oxford's loss is Banderton's gain!" Michael replied smiling at Charles as if to assure him that he was not in a serious mood.

"That was the 'unkindest cut of all'" D.P. murmured to Eustace when Uncle Joe bustled in with a tray of bacon and eggs.

"Uncle Joe! How wonderful!"

"S'marvellous isn't it!" agreed Uncle Joe, giving his moustache another flip, "and all within a stone's throw of Bow Street!" He winked knowingly and went to get them tea.

"Divine little man!" said D.P.

"We're so hungry!" Kimmie naively told Michael.

"Well, tuck in!"

They tucked. Kimmie's cup of happiness was complete; all this delight on what had started out to be a sugarless day. She looked up to share her pleasure with Dead Pan Hockey-Marking. D.P. smiled back at her, her grey-green eyes suddenly lighting up her long white face, "And you thought we'd have to use saccharine today!" D.P. teased.

"Saccharine?" repeated Michael. Kimmie's heart beat wildly.

"I wonder if Harry will join us?" She remarked, just to say *anything* hurriedly.

"Yes, where is Barlow?" Michael asked. "I felt that something was wrong, only four of the Frightful Five."

"Oh did you know that was our nick-name?" Eustace was rather pleased at the presumed notoriety.

"Everyone at Banderton's knows about us, I hope!" Charles said.

"Charles is very pompous today," D.P. told Michael and explained that Harry had gone off to Keith Prowse for a new swing record.

"He's the complete jive fan, isn't he?"

"Absolutely. I don't think he'll come," D.P. told Michael. "You

see, he hears one and gets in the 'groove' and stays in a gramophone booth playing everything in sight all through the lunch hour."

"Well, each to his taste . . ." suggested Michael.

"Don't you like swing, sir?" Eustace asked. Charles gave Eustace a side-glance as if to say that 'sirring' Michael was quite unnecessary. As if sensing this, Michael replied.

"Please don't 'sir' me—out of office hours, for heaven's sake, you'll make me feel a hundred! Yes, of course, I like a little swing, but I'd rather hear Tchaikowsky's 'Swan Lake'."

"So would I!" agreed Kimmie. "'Swan Lake' and Chopin and 'Coppélia'!" she added dreamily.

"Do you like 'Coppélia' especially?" Michael asked her. Kimmie enthusiastically nodded her head.

"Well, let's all go to the Ballet tomorrow night," he suggested. "They're doing 'Coppélia'."

Charles sat up in his seat as if he had been kicked, Eustace paused with a mouthful of bacon half-way to his mouth. Kimmie's eyes seemed more blue and wide than ever. Only Dead Pan Hockey-Marking's face was expressionless but she was the only one who replied casually:

"What a good idea!"

CHAPTER FIVE

MICHAEL DANE walked back with them from Uncle Joe's and D.P., echoing what was in Kimmie's mind, whispered, "I hope Joan Davidson and her mob see us!"

"Don't worry," Kimmie replied, waiting until Michael was addressing Eustace, "she'll hear all right!"

At the corner of Broad Court, Harry, hot and happy, his pudgy face aglow with a very expansive smile, flourished a record in his hand. "Got it!" He was so pleased about it that he had failed to grasp the significance of Michael Dane's presence.

"What is it, Barlow, Brahms?" Michael gravely enquired. Harry's grin faded. He fingered the knot of his bow tie.

"Well, no, as a matter of fact—" he began, in great confusion.

"A little something by Ellington, I fancy!" Michael added amidst laughter. Harry looked relieved.

"Have you had any lunch?" Kimmie asked him in motherly fashion.

"I had a sandwich, thanks!" Harry lied. "Where did you go?"

"Uncle Joe's. Bacon and eggs!"

"The old rogue!"

"Mr. Dane lunched with us," D.P. could not help adding proudly. Harry looked astonished.

"I shared their table," Michael explained.

They had reached Banderton's. Some of the students returning from

lunch eyed them enviously. D.P. saw Joan Davidson with a party of friends approaching from the other end of Broad Court. Quickly, but with studied casualness, she asked: "Where shall me meet—tomorrow, I mean? If you were serious, that is."

"Yes, of course I was serious," Michael assured her.

"Where are you all going?" Harry enquired. Charles gave him a dig in the ribs to shut him up. Charles had decided the best way he could get out of going was to give Harry his seat; *he* wasn't going to be a stooge while Kimmie Blaxland sighed at her Dramatic Coach.

"What about outside here at five-thirty, right after work?" Michael Dane suggested.

"Perfect!" D.P. replied, as Joan Davidson and her friends, with eyes and ears attuned in their direction, went into Banderton's.

"Well, my next class isn't until four, I think I'll stroll down to Waterloo Bridge and take a look at the Thames," Michael said, addressing them all.

"I expect it's still there!" Charles added. 'If he hoped to score', thought D.P. 'he failed miserably'. Michael had turned to Kimmie. "I look forward to hearing more about Casardo," he said.

"Casardi!" she corrected him and then, suddenly embarrassed, added quickly: "Well cheer-ho—and thanks awfully!" Kimmie's eyes shining with excitement. 'She's an ass' thought D.P., 'he'll see that she's putty in his hand and that's always bad when a man knows that.'

The Frightful Five walked into the Dramatic Academy and Michael turned back along Broad Court and down into Catherine Street. Kimmie sighed, rather too audibly D.P. thought and so D.P. nudged her: just because Kimmie had a Thing about Michael Dane, there was no need to lose the faithful Eustace, the arrogant Charles or the Jovial Harry . . . but they knew.

"What's the idea?" Harry asked.

"Well—" Eustace began, but Charles cut in quickly with:

"Dane asked us to the Ballet tomorrow night—jolly decent of him—really—"

"Are we paying or is he?" Eustace enquired, practically.

"A gentleman doesn't ask one out and then give you a bill at the end of the evening," Kimmie told him.

"No, but by the time some of them have tried a strangle-hold or two on you, you feel the account's been pretty squared up!" D.P. suggested.

"It must have been during black-out time; that's if you're referring to your own experiences!" Charles could not resist retorting.

"Can't you two ever stop quarrelling?"

Charles, turning to Harry, continued and lowered his voice: "Actually I can't go but I said you'd take my place."

"What's Charles telling you?" D.P. asked sharply. They took no notice of her.

"Eustace, what's Charles saying?"

Eustace bent over, trying to hear but he failed for Charles dropped his voice even lower.

"I expect he'll pay for the girls," he told Harry. Harry fingered his bow tie. "What the dickens am I doing at the Ballet?"

"Well, it's not often a teacher asks you out and you can't very well refuse—"

"How can I refuse when I haven't even said I'd go?"

"Naturally old man I thought you'd be delighted," Charles replied frigidly. "Common courtesy and all that."

"Well, what about your common courtesy and all that?"

"I happened to have a previous engagement," Charles explained with dignity.

"What about me? Con Chappell's asked me over to hear his Raymond Scott Collection."

Eustace who had been doing his best to catch the drift of the conversation, did manage to hear Charles say he had a previous engagement.

"I say, you chaps," he began, "this ballet business. I mean, are we his guests or not?"

By now the Frightful Five had reached the Miniature theatre where they were playing a performance of *Happy Breed*, which was to be done under the watchful eye of Mr. Benson Banderton himself. (When Harry Barlow had heard that the Old Man was taking the show he snorted and said: "He still thinks he's Coriolanus—*Happy Breed*, he probably thinks it's a flea show!") They stood in a group outside whilst the other students trailed into the auditorium, the three boys cabalistically to one side. Kimmie turned to Dead Pan, a worried look on her face.

"If they can't afford to join us . . . " she began. D.P. hurriedly drew her away from the others and into the auditorium.

"Don't be an ass!" she whispered. "They don't want to go. At least Charles doesn't and Harry wasn't invited and I'm pretty sure Eustace isn't keen!"

"But that's frightfully rude!"

"Is it? I don't suppose it'll bother Michael and I'm pretty sure it won't bother you, will it?"

"Glory, no!"

"That's what I mean!"

"All those taking part on stage please. Come along, we're late!" The resonant and revered Benson Banderton's voice boomed across the auditorium ("Always remember the man in the back row of the gallery") The boys hurried in.

"See you later," D.P. said and walked down the centre gangway to the stage. The three boys sat in the pit with Kimmie as they were not playing parts in the play on this occasion.

"I'm sorry, Kimmie" Charles said, "I won't be able to join you at the Ballet tomorrow night."

"Nor will I," Harry added.

"Well, I do think you might have told Michael Dane!"

"I couldn't, I didn't know a thing about it, did I?" Harry quickly protected himself.

"I didn't recall that I had a previous engagement until after Dane had left," Charles replied loftily. Kimmie, remembering D.P.'s words, said, more softly: "Well, you'll have to tell him. Think of something that won't offend him."

"I don't expect it'll make much difference to him, if we're there or not!" Eustace said.

"He's not going just to hold *my* hand!" Harry ventured.

"Harry Barlow!"

"Honestly, Kimmie, I don't think I can go, either," Eustace told her.

"You're a fine lot!" Kimmie replied, but she was beginning to become very elated.

"What are you worrying about Kim? Dead Pan will chaperone you," Harry pointed out.

"It's not that," Kimmie replied. "It's so rude." But lest they wavered, she added quickly: "Thank goodness he's not the sort to take offence!"

"Mr. Harradine!" Mr. Banderton called out punctiliously.

Eustace looked up at the stage. "Sir?"

"You seem to have forgotten that you are gracing the cast this class!"

Eustace looked very surprised and stood up quickly.

"Oh no, sir, I'm in *Happy Breed*, sir!" he replied.

"That is the play we are about to perform!" Mr. Banderton told him.

"Stap me!" Eustace exclaimed and hustled past Harry and Charles to get to the aisle.

"Who do you feel like now?" Harry whispered.

"He who gets slapped!" Eustace murmured and blushing furiously, with his trousers too high, coat too long, hair wanting a cut, a check shirt and a red cloth necktie with a very large knot, he hurried towards the footlights.

"The joke about Eustace Harradine is that he'll probably act us all off the stage—" Charles could not help observing.

"Why?" Kimmie asked.

"It's always the unexpected that happens in life!" Charles said.

"What about Dead Pan?" Harry asked. "She goes through every play as if she's Elvira in *Blithe Spirit*".

"She does not!" Kimmie instantly defending her friend with vehemence. "That's her make-up!"

"With so many coats on, you'd think she'd be hot!" Harry wise-cracked.

"What film did you see last night?" countered Kimmie.

"Don't get shirty Kimmie, I was only joking!"

Kimmie tossed her head, but, inside her heart was singing. Michael had lunched with them; she was going to the ballet with Michael

tomorrow night. Life, suddenly, was splendid! It was not until Dead Pan joined her for the next class in which they were split from the boys, that Kimmie was really able to enthuse about the next evening.

"Oh, D.P. I'll die before then!" she exclaimed.

"What good will that do you? If you do, you won't be here then to go out with him!"

"Don't be so dashed practical."

"Someone's got to be."

"You were right, you know, all the boys are crying off."

"But that's marvellous!"

"I feel rather mean about it," Kimmie confessed, "but I am glad . . . just the three of us."

"Two, you mean. You don't think I'll be there."

"Dead Pan!"

"Not me!"

"You must!"

"Don't be silly, Kimmie, you've been dreaming that this would happen and suddenly, out of the blue, it does. You don't want any of us there."

"If Michael Dane thought I was throwing myself at him . . . "

"Don't be a nit."

"In any case, he can't ask the Frightful Five and only one of them shows up!"

"No, that's true." D.P. agreed.

"Besides, I need a chaperone. It's the done thing."

"Are you going in period costume?"

"Don't tease, D.P. Look, can you stay the night? We must talk about it!" Kimmie said.

"Of course!" agreed D.P. She knew that there was nothing further to say, but she loved staying with Kimmie at Armynter Court. "I'll have to telephone my people; and you'll have to lend me a nightie and I must buy a tooth brush and—"

"It's time you left a suitcase of things at my place and then, whenever you stay, you won't have to get things—"

"Events may so develop . . ." D.P. began significantly. Kimmie, starry-eyed, her wide mouth slightly parted, looked at D.P. with suppressed excitement.

"I don't know what you mean, but I'm loving every minute of it!" she confessed.

"Nit!" D.P. called her again, and then searched for pennies in her bag. "It's time they made all 'phone calls free" she said, and then, finding some coppers added, as if they had contemplated visiting Parliament: "And the 'Ladies', too! Why a girl has to go through life spending a penny every time she . . . "

"Oh go and 'phone and stop raving!" Kimmie laughingly ordered.

"Raving! Me! The only sane one at Banderton's!" D.P. hurried out to the public box in the hall of the dramatic academy, calling out over her shoulder: "Bag me a place!"

"Of course, do you think I'm going to sit with the Joan Davidson mob after what's happened today?" Kimmie shouted back.

When the Frightful Five re-met in order to say good-bye after work (they usually spent a few minutes standing idly chatting at the corner of Broad Court whilst the other students dispersed) Charles Grafton was not with them. The first thing Kimmie did was to ask Eustace and Harry if they had made their apologies to Michael Dane.

Harry, as usual, when he was embarrassed, fingered his bow tie and hesitated. He hoped that Eustace would explain. Eustace coughed but did not speak.

"Well?" Kimmie's blue eyes flicked from the chubby, ruddy face of Harry to the long thin sad-eyed countenance of Eustace Harradine.

"The fact is—" Harry began.

"You see—" Eustace started.

"Charles Grafton is doing it for you, I suppose?" hazarded D.P.

"Yes. We didn't all want to queue up to tell him, did we?" Harry put it to the girls as lightly as he could.

"Charles is a sort of spokesman."

"You boys are hopeless."

"He never invited me. I was at Keith Prowse . . ." Harry began.

"This is where we came in!" D.P. interrupted him.

"Anyway, he does know, doesn't he? No funny business, we don't want him buying five seats for us and only two of us turn up."

"Of course, we're not sure that he's paying. If we'd been sure . . ." Eustace trailed off. The impression he gave was that he might have joined them, if there had been a guarantee that the seats had been paid for by Michael Dane. Eustace was never as hard up as he liked to appear. A lot depended on the character he felt like that day. One of his favourite rôles began, in his own mind, with the telling of a story which started "It was in Times Square, mid-winter, I was flat broke at the time . . ."

"Well, I'm going to a flick, anyone coming?" Harry asked, relieved to be able to go on to another topic.

"I'm going home with Kimmie," D.P. said.

"How about you, Eustace?" Harry turned to him.

"Can't afford anything but a newsreel theatre," he said mournfully. He looked at Kimmie as if he were drinking in as much memory of her as he could before she departed, so that it would last him until tomorrow morning. At that moment Charles came hurrying out of Banderton's. He was a little out of breath and had run down the corridor, angry that the apology to Michael Dane had taken so long, resentful for fear that Kimmie might have left. He pulled up quickly when he saw the group and a look of annoyance crossed his handsome young face. He did not like to give himself away, like that. He cursed himself for not dropping to a nonchalant pace just inside the Banderton main doors. Kimmie and D.P. were not looking his way, however, and he was able to join them quite casually, even if his breathing was a bit heavy. Kimmie turned expectantly.

"All right? Did you see him?"

Charles nodded: 'All this flap' he thought. He said: "Talkative type, Master Dane."

"Did he mind?" Kimmie enquired.

"I wouldn't know that, he laughed and said he was sorry his invitation was so sudden. I expect he'll get on without us."

"I do think it's mean of you boys," Kimmie began.

"Do you?" Charles thrust at her pointedly.

"Oh go and get drunk!" D.P. told him.

"I'm going to a flick," Harry told him. "Coming?"

"You're the flick king," Charles replied. He turned back and gave Kimmie a penetrating look.

"Oh don't dramatise it!" D.P. said

"I want a drink!" Charles said with deliberation. The idea behind it was that if he grew up to be an inveterate drunkard, Kimmie Blaxland was to blame. It was almost a Eustace Harradine gesture.

"O.K. We can get a quick one at the *Globe*," Harry pacified. He looked at Eustace.

"How about you, Eustace?"

"I'll have a small one and see a news reel."

"I want a large one—several—and I don't want to see a news reel," Charles said firmly. 'He is just being bloody-minded,' D.P. thought. Kimmie thought 'Oh dear, I believe he's jealous and I didn't want that, but I did want to go to the Ballet with Michael without the gang. Yes, please, Lord, please don't let anything happen to spoil tomorrow night. Don't let a tile fall on Michael, or let me slip off the 'bus and fracture a leg. Not tonight, Lord. Preserve us both till tomorrow . . .'

"Well, I think you two chaps had better have your drink and I'll walk through to Piccadilly," Eustace decided.

"Right-o!" Harry agreed. "We'll walk up to the *Enterprise*. Come up to Long Acre and cut through, Eustace."

There was a pause before the good-byes, an "atmosphere" had been created and none of them liked it, they wanted it cleared up before they separated; but nobody offered any reconciliatory speech. Finally:

"Cheer-ho!" said Harry.

"Bye, now!" Kimmie replied.

But still none of them moved off.

Charles was very anxious to know what Kimmie was doing that evening but he refrained from asking. He cocked an eyebrow skywards which denoted that he was in a cynical mood and made a half salute. Harry grinned unhappily at the girls: it was a smile like a wintry sun, little warmth behind it. Eustace gazed longingly almost hungrily at Kimmie. None of the boys wanted to make the first move.

"Good night, gentlemen!" said D.P. taking the initiative. Kimmie with D.P. moving her by the arm quickly down Bow Street, turned and called out: "See you in the morning!"

In depressed mood, the three young men walked up to the *Enter-*

prise. As they walked, Eustace was the one who put into words what seemed to be the cause of the upset.

"It's a pity Dane asked us to the Ballet, at all, really."

"Why did he?" Harry asked.

"We were all lurching at Uncle Joe's and Kimmie practically forced him to," Charles told him. Eustace would not stand for that.

"I say, Charles, not exactly."

"Not in so many words, but you know how nuts she is about him."

"I don't think she's really so frightfully keen . . ." Eustace defended, partly to alleviate his own feelings, to administer a slight quietener to his beating heart.

"She's such a child!" Charles exclaimed, with all the impetuous intolerant irritation of modern youth who was a few months older, and isn't getting what he wants of life.

"All I know is Kimmie needs protection . . ." Eustace began.

"Then why the devil are you letting her go to the theatre with Dane?" Charles snapped accusingly.

"Perhaps that's what Dane wanted," Harry ventured.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he probably asked you all out of politeness but didn't expect you'd accept. I mean, perhaps, he knew you'd all—we'd all take the hint," Harry continued excitedly.

"Well, I'm damned!" Charles exclaimed, examining the plausibility of Harry's slant on the incident.

"I'd—I'd never thought of that!" Eustace agreed, jealousy suddenly shooting through him, like a sharp pain.

"Taking advantage of his position!" voiced Charles bitterly.

"What a mean trick!" Harry said, indignantly.

"Why didn't she refuse?" Eustace asked.

"Don't be a fool, man!" said Charles, "I told you, she's nuts about him."

The three young men walked on in silence, vividly, re-living, individually in their minds the whole episode, like a cinema flash-back.

As they reached the *Enterprise* and turned into the saloon bar, Charles said:

"Blast!"

"We're mugs!" added Harry.

"I wish I was ten years older," wailed Eustace.

Kimmie and Dead Pan walked down Bow Street into Wellington and were turning into Tavistock with the intention of going down Burleigh Street to catch a Piccadilly 'bus back to Armynter Court from outside the Strand Woolworth's, when a low masculine voice, close behind them, called out:

"Good evening!"

The two girls heard it, but did not pay any attention. Often, especially in the Market, if they cut through to Leicester Square, they were chi-acked by the fruiterers, betting-slip men and loiterers. Some-

times an aggressive business man would, as D.P. put it "give us the old try-on" and, now and then, an energetic young clerk would attempt a conversation in the 'bus queue en route to Banderton's ("But in the morning, no!" D.P. would croon with expressionless face). The approving whistle, copied from departed G.I.s, (now ensconced in the bosoms of families they had previously denied existed to love-sick British maidens) often followed the young ladies as they walked along Jermyn Street. In these post-war days expressions of approval, attempts at conversation, the throwing of an appraising wisecrack, these were all part of the honkey-tonkey quality which had come to the big cities. Kimmie and D.P. were used to them: not to receive them could be likened to a film star whose fan mail stopped; there was a certain valuation to them, even if they were annoying.

"Good evening!" the voice persisted. It was a refined, soft voice and the male adventurer was no ordinary type of casual picker of street romances. Nevertheless, D.P. was preparing in her mind the formation of a juicy sentence which would put the hunter in his place, with no uncertainty about her meaning.

"I say, do excuse me . . ." the voice was less sure of itself now. Dead Pan swung round and prepared to give the owner of the voice a broadside. Then she gasped.

"Oh!"

Kimmie turned back at this "oh!"

Mr. Rory Malone, the artist who lived in the flat underneath, at Armynter Court, was raising a very battered, almost green-black soft hat.

"I—er—well, I recognised your back view, as I came down Wellington Street," he began, gulping so that his Adam's apple moved fast and fascinatingly in his throat. His eyes, big and brown and "starey", blazed like a fanatic. He was very nervous and he smiled suddenly and lost it again, then wet his lips with his tongue. He seemed to be under a great stress.

"Good evening!" Kimmie said.

D.P. looked at him curiously, waiting for his explanation. As if he sensed this, Rory Malone explained: "I've been to Odhams, about some commissions."

"Commissions?"

"Drawings—illustrations for a serial."

"Oh, I see!"

They paused on the pavement at the corner of the Strand and Kingsway and, when the traffic lights changed, crossed hurriedly in order to get to the queue ahead of some of the hundreds who were making for number eleven, sixty and fourteen 'buses. Rory, with thumping heart, elation waiting to burst through, thought 'It worked. I'm doing O.K. It was worth it. The wait in the archway at the Opera House, watching Broad Court, waiting for them to come out, was worth it. It was a grand idea, grandly played. I've met her out in the street, we are walking home together. She has taken it all as a matter of course.

We are Londoners, going about our jobs, she is learning to be an actress and I am an artist, plying my trade, discussing illustrations with an editor in Long Acre. It's reasonable. We live next to one another, now we are going home'.

"Are you going home—to Armynter Court, I mean?" Kimmie asked him.

"Oh yes, rather; finished for the day now."

"Did you sell your drawings?" D.P. suddenly asked (was it suspiciously? He ought to have carried some under his arm, fool that he was!)

"Er—well, not exactly, we—er—we discussed them—er—they're sending me the serial to read and then to make the necessary illustrations!" Rory explained (Wish to God they were!)

"I would like to read it, when you've made the illustrations, of course. Read it in connection with your drawings, I mean."

"Oh, yes, er, thanks!" (That was something he hadn't considered. *Think quickly, Rory Malone!*)

"It may be some time yet before it fully materialises . . ." he explained. "I may make some rough ideas meanwhile." (That was good. That was leading nicely up to an invitation to look at his paintings).

"That would be difficult, if you don't know what the story's about, won't it?" the pale, dark-haired girl said, as he took his place behind them in the 'bus queue. He was not sure about Kimmie's friend. Not sure at all. She knew about sex, that was disturbing. She was more than a chaperone, she was a wise guy too. It was a pity about her, but it was better to accost them together. It was more natural, coming as it were, from Odhams and accidentally meeting on the way back to Armynter Court.

"The editor gave me an outline of the story, to see if I'd like to do the illustrations," he explained. (Blast you! You know too much!)

D.P. nodded but did not turn back and look at him. It made matters worse. What was she thinking? How much did she suspect? The elation within him, anxious to well up, subsided. His heart hammered away. He had to reassure himself. Doing fine, Rory boyo, doing very well.

Two Number six 'buses passed the queue, full to capacity, the third accepted the head six of the queue. The rest moved up.

"This is the time I wish I had a husband with a large car," said D.P. addressing her remark to Kimmie. Kimmie, profiling, so that Rory could be politely brought into the conversation, replied:

"If you had a husband you wouldn't be at Banderton's!"

"You're both at Banderton's, are you?" (as if he didn't know!)

"Yes, rather."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes."

"I'd—er—I'd like to know more about it."

"Why?"

It came like a slap in the face. In fact, he wasn't quite sure, if . . .

"Why?" D.P. repeated.

(Think fast Mr. Malone!)

"It might make a good picture—er—young people, costumes and so on. I expect you wear costumes?" (Talk fast, Mr. Malone!)

"Only for the end-of-term shows for the parents and the prize-giving competitions," Kimmie told him.

"Well, the stage and the young people . . . "

"Do you like painting young people?" the pale faced dark haired friend asked, looking back at him. If only he could be sure that she was just *dumb* and not very subtle.

"Well, I . . . " The arrival of the Number 15 'bus helped him.

"'Urry along, plis! Both sides on. Two inside, three on top!"

The girls clambered on top. Kimmie laughingly stopped and swayed on the stairs as the 'bus swerved out suddenly to overtake another, and caused her temporarily to lose her balance. D.P. thought 'He's looking at my legs and wishing they were Kimmie's'. She was very surprised to find herself thinking this and pondered over it. Kimmie and her men friends! *Forever, Amber!* She smiled and giggled.

"What's the matter, D.P.?" Kimmie enquired as they reached the three vacant seats.

"I'm meditating."

Kimmie said: "Something rude, I expect!" she looked across at Rory Malone, sitting in the one free seat, on the other side of the 'bus, took off his old hat and wiped a not-too-clean handkerchief across his wet brow. His hair, thick and dark, was wild and gypsy-like. He looked unhappy on the 'bus top, as if he should be in leather jerkin and riding the moors on a saddleless horse. She thought of Michael Dane in a jerkin and riding a saddleless horse, but the picture did not seem quite true. She thought of the three of them sitting in the front row of the dress circle the next evening, and imagined Michael, unseen by D.P., dropping his hand so that it touched hers. She clasped it readily. His grip tightened. She could tell he loved her . . .

"Fares, plis!"

The girls paid their own. Rory Malone fumbled in his pockets and produced an old wallet, stained and greasy, and peered into it.

"It looks as if a moth'll fly out any minute!" D.P. whispered. Kimmie did not laugh. It suddenly occurred to her that, perhaps, Mr. Malone was hard up. She hoped he would sell his drawings. How terrible to be a starving artist. She suddenly realised how hungry she was. She wished she had more pocket money, it would be nice to drop into Simpsons (that's where Luff, her father, liked to take them) and have a jolly good meal, to feed up the thin, strange-eyed Rory Malone. And then, surprisingly, as they approached Armynter Court, the artist said:

"I wonder if you'll be in the *Duke's Arms*? If so, if you'd have a drink with me?"

"Well, we hardly ever do. Now and then, of course," Kimmie added, so that he would not think they were 'stuffy'.

"I'm thinking of doing a painting—you know, Queenie and Co., and you'd give it a rather striking added—er, quality," Rory explained.

"Wouldn't we be out of place?" D.P. asked.

"Don't be a snob D.P.!" Kimmie told her, then, realising that Mr. Malone had not really been formally introduced, turned to him and said:

"This is Miss Mary Hockey-Marking—D.P. for short—and I'm Kimmie Blaxland."

"Yes, I know you are. Why is your friend called Dippy for short?"

"We won't go into that now," D.P. said. "Why was there that hostility in her eyes? As if I didn't know!"

"You won't be out of place in the bar, because you'd be a couple of dramatic students sipping beer—or—er—lemonade."

"Do we *look* like a couple of dramatic students?" D.P. asked. Rory was not sure how she wanted that answered.

"Well, the fact remains, we are!" Kimmie laughingly replied. Rory Malone breathed again.

They reached the courtyard archway and walked through. On the left of the quadrangle, the lights blazed out from Max's little haircutting place. Maxie did not close till seven. His trade was brisk for the last hour, he cut the hair of the men who could not find time to drop in during office hours and have it done then. As he clipped, he gave quick looks into the mirror and, in its reflection, he watched the life of the courtyard. When he saw Rory Malone escorting Kimmie Blaxland and her friend, he murmured:

"'Ullo, 'ullo!" and he grunted.

"What's up?" his customer asked.

"See 'er?" Max jabbed at the mirror with his scissors, pointing at Kimmie. "Lovely, eh?" He clicked his scissors appreciatively. "Proper little bitch!" He exclaimed in admiring tones.

On the hallway, outside Rory Malone's flat, the girls paused before going en route up to the next floor.

"Do you . . . er . . . will you?" Rory Malone stuttered. His pupils were like great big black grapes. Kimmie was suddenly aware of a quality in him that reminded her of Eustace Harradine. She was touched.

"We may look in," she told him.

His face lit up.

"About what time?" he asked.

"About nine." Kimmie said and hurried upstairs. After she had unlocked the door of number 7A. D.P. followed her in and said:

"Kimmie Blaxland, you're an ass!"

"I know," Kimmie agreed.

CHAPTER SIX

AT the end of the courtyard, in Armynter Court Mansions, Brenda Swift mixed herself a gin and lime and walked with it, over to the front window of the apartment frowning slightly, and looked down into Jermyn Street. Ralph Checker had promised to telephone at six and now it was nearer seven. It really was inconsiderate of him. He never telephoned at the time he told her. Life was a series of intervals waiting for the telephone to ring. She was getting hungry and if he left it too late, she would find it difficult to find anyone free to take her to dinner. She sipped her drink and thought about the dinner she would like, a fricassée of chicken, perhaps, or some lobster Neuberg. She had to smile; the idea of Brenda Swift automatically thinking of fancy meals like that—meals that her folk would not know about, nor like, if they did: plain wholesome food at the Swifts, all right, no la-di-da stuff there!

Jermyn Street was pretty dull, it was the twilight hour when the workers had left and the night birds had not yet come out. 'There', she mused, 'by the Grace of God, might have been Brenda Smith. Come a long way in a little time, Miss Smith, pardon, Miss Swift, I mean!'

She took her drink over to the back window and looked down on to Armynter Courtyard. That was normally interesting—if the little English boys from outside the Court (they were the Terry twins but she did not know their names) were not making Commando raids on the Casardi kids who lived in the dirty little Café, the sort of café her father would like; then there was the activity at the Milk Bar, or the Betting-slip man was "collecting", or the weak-minded young man was worth watching, straining intently trying to collect his thoughts which scudded cloud-like, vaporous things, across his poor mind. Now and then there were harsh words in the courtyard and fights and laughter. The pub at the far end, the *Duke's Arms*, was noisy and full of life. Later, when darkness had shrouded the city, the glare from the *Duke's Arms* spread warmth into the courtyard. Sometimes she would sit in the darkness and look down on the scene, watching and thinking. People would collect from all parts of the courtyard for a drink, to seek comradeship, to snatch at warmth, to enjoy companionship, to get drunk, to forget, to pass the time away. *To pass the time away!* Yes, of course! How stupid of her, the very place to spend the dreary hours of waiting, when one could no longer be bothered to change the gramophone needle, when the radio bored one, when the photographs in the *Tatler* looked all alike—The *Duke's Arms*. Why hadn't she thought of it before? Well, she had. Yes, why kid oneself? If Ralph knew. If Ralph found out, that was what had stopped her going down for a 'quick one' or a look around. But what a fool she had been—after all, it was the sort of place which Ralph would like her to visit, it was *discreet*. Well, not exactly *discreet*, but it certainly was not the sort of place where she'd be spotted. And even if she were spotted, what did that matter? It was

Ralph being spotted with her that bothered him. 'Not good for business', of course. Honest Ralph Checker. A good sort. Family man. And all that. To go to the *Duke's Arms* for a bit of company alone, was, surely a good thing? Not quite the social standing required if you lived at the Mansions? Well, if she walked out of the Mansions and went as far as the Plaza and strolled back and straight into the courtyard and into the *Duke's Arms* . . .

Brenda sipped her drink and mused about it. The light from the lamp in the courtyard below, caught the front of her tawny hair and dyed it a plummy red. The light, coming from beneath her, cast strange shadows on her face making it look like a mask, but its tranquillity was denied by her eyes. Brenda was thinking feverishly now. If Ralph telephoned too late for her to do anything—that is, too late to ring up anyone to give her dinner, then she had a perfect right to nip out and have a quick one at the *Duke's Arms*. It wasn't that she needed the drink—plenty of hooch in the flat—but it was the damned loneliness. Like being on a chain. A business man's plaything. There when it suited him. That was a fine life for a girl! A girl needed friends . . . Not friends who were called up at the last minute, to act as stop-gaps until Ralph decided he would be around. That was how she had lost Norman the nice boy who was in the Navy. The nice boys didn't like a girl to be 'on tap', that is, not to someone else.

Perhaps it was her own fault. If she had let Ralph move in permanently, or taken that Marlowe house for them both . . . no, oh no! This arrangement was purely temporary. Once Ralph brought anything more than a suitcase into the place, then the position changed: it would be as difficult to get Ralph 'out' as it would to get away from him. She knew that. If he took the Marlowe house that was for him.

Suddenly she laughed. A deep, resonant laugh. It ended in a little giggle, a laugh like a stream that ended in a little pool of water. Funny, she thought, funny to be a kept woman, to be a mistress on Butter Scotch!

The telephone rang suddenly, startlingly and she jumped, spilling her gin and lime on the carpet. She swore quietly and went over to the 'phone and answered it after fumbling in the gloom for it.

"Brenda?"

"Naturally!"

"Ralph."

"Yes?"

"I'll be a little while yet."

"Then you're coming over?"

"Yes."

"Well, when?"

"As soon as I can."

"Will you have eaten?"

"Yes."

"Oh!"

"Now, what's the matter with that? I'm dining now. **Business** matter," Ralph said, angrily.

"Then I'll get something here."

"Of course, that's the whole idea of . . . That's what we've got an ice box for, isn't it?" he said, explosively. His business could not be going smoothly.

It wasn't worth trying to point out that there was not much joy in a piece of cheese and a tin of sardines.

"About how long do you *think* you'll be?" she asked him.

"About an hour."

"All right!" she said wearily. She felt for the telephone stand and cradled the receiver and went back to the window overlooking the courtyard. *That's what we've got an ice box for, isn't it?* No, it isn't Ralph Checker! One of the reasons it's here is to avoid getting everlasting meals. I've seen Ma do too many in her time, thank you. Dishes, all the time washing dishes. No, thanks. It was all right for Ralph. He did not have to mark time. He was beginning to take it all for granted. An hour to while away. Not enough time to go out for a meal. Not enough time to do very much. Thanks to Barney's Butter Scotch! She wondered if there was a Mr. Barney. Hiram K. Barney or Al Z. Barney, the Butter Scotch King, and whether he had a Brenda Swift tucked away somewhere in a New York pent-house just as his lieutenants had, in minor degrees, all over the world? A nice idea for a 'slogan', wasn't that the word? If you want to be kept on ice, be kept by Barney's Butter Scotch! Now she was getting stupid . . .

Down in the courtyard the weak-minded man they called Arthur, was smiling at the Casardi boys who tried to creep up unseen by him and pull at his coat. He always looked round too late. It was strange that he did not appear frightened by them. Perhaps his mind did not know fear. She watched a tall, elderly lady, drably dressed in black, old fashioned but dignified, come out of a door between the Milk Bar and the greengrocer's. She had fear, this old girl. Yes, she had fear. Of poverty? Brenda watched her make her way with sedate steps to the *Duke's Arms*.

"Lady!" Brenda said aloud as if she were personally addressing Mrs. Starling, formerly in the employment of a nice de Raynor family as governess, " I think perhaps you have something there!"

Brenda wondered what she should wear.

Kimmie and Dead Pan were in the bathroom which was also the kitchen at number 7A. It became a bathroom by removing a kitchen table, a wooden top fitted to the bath. D.P. was already in the bath, trying to pretend the three inches of water was luxury, and Kimmie was busy at the mirror above the mantelpiece, putting her hair up. It was only right that the guest should have the first bath. Kimmie sang cheerfully and D.P. tried to whistle the tune as an accompaniment. It was not very successful.

D.P.'s singing had a dirge-like quality and was very flat. Kimmie

stopped singing to ask a question quickly, excitedly; for her 'date' the next evening, had that effect on her, of wanting to express things with speed, suddenly, bingo! just like that.

"What are we going to wear tomorrow? I mean, formal or informal?"

D.P. lazily contemplated her toes.

"I haven't a thing to wear," she confessed.

"Not much you haven't. It's me. I'm absolutely threadbare."

"I don't expect Michael will mind."

"It *is* exciting, isn't it, D.P.?"

"Of course. He's very smooth," Dead Pan agreed. She looked at her flat stomach and pulled it in so that a rivulet of water creased across it.

"I'm glad you think so. I'm glad you don't think I'm making a mistake."

"You haven't had a chance to make a mistake yet," D.P. replied.

"Dead Pan Hockey-Marking!"

"Well?"

"I didn't mean that."

"Now you're not going to tell me it's going to be platonic?" D.P. enquired, getting up and gawkily searching for the soap. She looked so gauche and awkward that Kimmie began to laugh.

"What are you pretending to be, *September Morn*?"

"I can't find the Sandalwood." D.P. confessed.

"Don't be silly, it's the largest cake I've got and there's practically no water in the bath—"

"You're telling me!"

"Sorry this isn't the Ritz. Have you tried looking in the saucer on the floor?"

"Oh, thanks!" D.P. bent over the rim of the bath and took the soap and began to apply it. As she cleansed herself she said: "What's this artist chap want?"

"About the picture? It's a nice idea—"

"Nice idea be blowed. He's a bit keen."

"On you or me?"

"Don't be silly!" D.P. said, without a trace of envy.

"Do you think Michael's a bit keen?" Kimmie asked.

"I don't know. The chap below is, what's his name?"

"Rory Malone."

"I've heard of David Jagger," D.P. said, pointedly.

"I don't think Mr. Malone's very good yet," Kimmie told her.

D.P. sat down in the bath and sluiced herself. Kimmie undressed slowly.

"Do you mean to tell me that we're going to stand about a lousy little pub to be painted by an artist that's not very good yet? Why don't we wait until he *is* good?"

"Well, we might appear in the picture as two white-headed old hay bags."

"Don't you think he'll ever be any good?" D.P. enquired as if denying Rory Malone the right to breathe.

"I've only seen a few of his things, as I've passed the open door but I—well, it's unkind to say so, but I doubt it."

"It strikes me the whole evening's going to be a dead loss!"

"Well, we had nothing to do—"

"Except talk about your Michael Dane!"

"So I don't see that it really matters. Besides, I like the *Duke's Arms*, only one can't go in except, well, like this invitation."

"This invitation is a bit fishy."

"What do you mean, D.P.? Do you think he's broke? I do."

"No, but I think he'll probably ask you to see his etchings."

"Ass!"

"Mark my words! He's not asking us to drink with him because he wants to discuss World Peace."

"You've a nasty suspicious mind and please get out of the bath because I'm cold."

"If Mr. Dane could see you now."

"Maybe he will—one day!"

"Kimmie Blaxland what would your dear Papa Luff say?"

"Cripes or Lawks, I expect. Daddy still talks as if he were in the Fifth Form at St. Dominic's."

"Your people are awfully nice."

"Because they let me have this little flat so that I can become a great actress?" Kimmie imitated Katherine Hepburn as she said "great actress". D.P. smiled and shook her head. The girls clutched one another as Kimmie, getting into the bath, shared the cork bath mat on the kitchen floor with D.P. getting out.

"It's quite hot still. Perhaps I can squeeze another inch out of the tap," Kimmie said.

"Good idea!"

On this cue, the switch over was completed. Kimmie was in the bath and D.P. began to dry herself, standing on the cork mat.

"I'm glad you asked me," D.P. said as she towelled herself. "It's fun having your own place."

"I couldn't have come back here alone, with all the business of tomorrow on my mind. What are we going to wear?"

"The thing is, is he going to take us out *afterwards*?"

"Well, if we wear something very nice, he probably will."

"Yes, but we don't want him to feel he's not put enough 'props' on."

"No, that's true. I mean, Joan Davidson would be so camp, my dear, she'd have everything on but the kitchen stove."

"Exactly! So it's got to be something very simple but suitable for any occasion."

"Any occasion?"

"Now! Now!"

"I mean, in case he says the Savoy Grill—"

"Or Joe Lyons."

"Or Uncle Joe's again!"

The two girls laughed happily.

Below them, prodding a sausage almost carefully, Rory Malone tried to picture how the evening would pan out. Suddenly he had become very hungry and he had to eat before he went down there. Man! but he was starving! So far, he had managed things rather skilfully. The casual invitation, the reason for the invitation. A drink or two, to get acquainted. *And that's all, Rory. That's all, my bonny bucko, if you want to have a beautiful friendship. That made you wince, eh? Beautiful friendship my Aunt Fanny! You don't want any beautiful friendships, do you? Of course not. Well, whatever you want and, of course, I know you are honest and kind and just a little bit emotional, let it go at that.* Tonight, anyway. No, don't start wondering if the friend Dippy is staying with her. Even if she goes home, don't start suggesting anything, anything at all. You've met the girl officially. She's sweet and lovely and you've wanted to meet her, wanted it desperately. O.K. she's even coming into the Duke's Arms to have a drink with you. Be satisfied. What's that nasty idea forming in your sly little brain? The pub in Jermyn Street? So you won't be seen? Getting a bit squeamish about the Duke's Arms, eh? They might wonder at this sudden friendship? Why should they, Rory boy? Why should they? She lives in the flat above you. She has done so for some time. No reason why you shouldn't become acquainted, no reason why not, at all. I said acquainted Rory. That's why the other girl will be present. See? But I'm telling you man, you're as weak and greasy as a pat of butter—and as yellow.

In the *Duke's Arms*, in the saloon bar, to show her social standing, Mrs. Starling sat quietly in the corner sipping her Guinness as if it were Green Chartreuse. Max, who had shut up his kiosk, was having half a pint at the bar before going home, twitting Queenie, the barmaid, whose unnatural blonde hair was piled high on her head and held there by a scarlet ribbon and a gay butterfly ornament in imitation precious stones. She had the appearance of one who eased her bosom and backside into her dress with the aid of a shoehorn. She was as much a part of the *Duke's Arms* as the fittings. Somehow one could not picture her anywhere else except, perhaps, for fleeting furtive meetings in the dark corridor separating the saloon from the public bar, where the more lecherous and less particular males indulged in a sudden, spasmodic slap and tickle which ended in Queenie's wheezy laugh turning to an irritating, rasping cough. The impression Queenie gave was that the only thing that really mattered in life was a nice glass of port and that, if any of her men friends ever succeeded in downing her, she would, like as not, at the critical moment, be sipping a drink, with a far away look in her slightly bleary eyes, remembering a rather nice Tawny she once had when she served in a four-ale establishment in Manchester.

Kid Cato, the betting-slip man, whose eyebrows started low by the top of his nose and then went high as they grew above his eyes, giving him a perpetually surprised look, was carefully shaved and wearing

a neat blue pin-stripe suit, a loud tie and very narrow brown shoes. His hair, parted down the middle, was sleeked down and shone with an odoriferous substance called *Flowers in Spring Essence*. He was waiting for Priscilla from the greengrocer's. Priscilla was going to go all the way home to Perkins Rents, Victoria, change and come back to the *Duke's Arms*, and they were going to the Warners, Leicester Square, where, as Kid Cato put it "She'd see another 'air-do and spend all night copying it."

"You should know!" Queenie had added, archly, hips swaying like a music-sodden cobra.

The Kid was troubled by Priscilla. Priscilla, lithe, tall and willowy was on his mind ("smashin', like a mannekin!" Kid Cato described her). All day long, as he moved swiftly among the Jermyn Street crowds, pausing at corners to accept bets, he contemplated marriage. But marriage was against his principles. Marriage tied you. Marriage made a mug of you. He was a bookie by trade because, in that profession, he was his own boss. Marriage meant partnership. Marriage meant babies and school fees and feeding the little beggars. Two could live as cheap as one, my eye! No, marriage was a mug's game. But Priscilla wanted marriage. She had hinted in no uncertain terms. Priscilla was stuffed full of film nonsense; she saw it all with soft music and gooey photography and celestial harps. Priscilla's idea of marriage was based on an M-G-M Park Avenue house, and dialogue by a Paramount ace. Priscilla lived by her hard work at the greengrocer's in a London courtyard, but that did not prevent her from thinking that love was something romantic and wonderful and possible. Kid Cato was more of a realist. Life was tough enough—dodging rozzers and getting caught for a packet now and then, and trying to take it easy in your own time; but Priscilla was a lovely girl and they were happy together even if they did argue something chronic. Well, it was good to find a girl with spirit . . . and so the Kid would muse on. Sometimes the coins in his leather money bag, which he wore under his coat and just out of sight, would jangle her name and sometimes, as he looked down at the trees in King Charles's Square, he was reminded of her tall grace. He called her the Duchess. For fun, of course. But he meant it. With a wash and a brush up Priscilla looked like a duchess, leastways if he ever saw a duchess, that's what she'd look like. A duchess with a love complex. It was dangerous. It was dynamite. Perhaps his mental reverie gave his eyebrows the curious handle-bar twist. He was fleshy, but tough. He had a sense of humour and people liked him. He liked people, though most of them were mugs. He was not a mug himself, he was a fly boy. He spent his money dancing and buying smart suits. That would have to stop if he married Priscilla, the Duchess. Life sure was difficult!

Said Maxie, to Queenie, smacking his lips and winking across at Kid Cato:

"Think he's let you down, Queenie!"

Queenie giggled. She loved it. She practically whinnied with delight:

“Can’t think what you mean!” she said.

“Come off it!”

“You mean Mr. Flarf?”

“‘You mean Mr. Flarf?’” mimicked Max. “Of course I mean Mr. Flarf. Thought he said to expect him this evening at opening time?”

“Did ‘e?”

“‘Did ‘e?’ Next you’ll be telling me this isn’t the *Dook’s Arms* and that you’re not Queenie Brampton, but Lana Turner!”

“I’d like to know what she’s got that I ‘aven’t!” Queenie retorted, going off on a feminine tangent.

“A ‘ollywood contract!” said Kid Cato as he picked up a dart and straightened its feathers. Max laughed loudly and Mrs. Starling smiled weakly into her Guinness (though she considered the conversation had very little point, but was comforting to a woman who spent hours alone earning an occasional three bob turning a shirt cuff).

“Never trust Commercials!” Max began again, this time winking at Mrs. Starling just as she lifted her head from her Guinness and so embarrassing the meek old woman that she flushed and looked down at it again intently, as if such conversation bordered on the obscene.

“And what’s wrong with Commercials?” Queenie enquired, banging a half pint on the counter for a cloth-capped customer who went through life sniffing.

“Oh nothing. Wife in every port and all that.”

“You’re thinking of sailors!” Queenie, loving every minute of it, corrected him.

“Oh am I?” Max said. “Shouldn’t be surprised if Mr. Flarf wasn’t a sailor. Got the same approach, if you follow me!” He added. Queenie went off into shrieks of laughter, though she had not bothered to analyse what Max had suggested, it was the idea of it. Maxie was pulling her leg about Mr. Flarf, the Commercial gentleman. It made Queenie feel important and girlish and, of course, whereas there was nothing to it, it made a bit o’ fun and p’raps . . . Queenie made some chirping noises with her tongue against her top denture where a fish bone had lodged from high tea.

Kid Cato asked the cloth-capped customer if he played darts and the newcomer sniffed and said he was sorry, mate, but his game was snooker and, feeling all eyes on him at this seemingly surprising revelation, he gulped down the rest of his half pint, mumbled a “good night, all!” and fled into the courtyard.

Kid Cato looked at Maxie hopefully but the latter shook his head.

“Sorry, chum, got to get ‘ome, though I did ‘ope to see the big-business man re-appear from his provincial tour!”

Queenie shrieked noisily again and polished a glass with such a fierceness that it was astonishing that it did not crack.

Kid Cato threw the dart, scoring a bull, and then, immediately

losing interest, sat down next to Mrs. Starling who, sipping her drink, gulped with emotion at the sudden proximity of the Kid, *Flowers in Spring Essence* and all, so that she coughed and spluttered in a manner that the de Raynors ("with whom I was a governess to the two sons, Mr. Robin and Mr. Peter, you know") would have frowned upon as being far from genteel. Mr. Brember, the toy-yacht man, entered, coughed self-consciously, touched his bowler hat at the room in general in salute and, taking a half of ale from Queenie, moved over to the dartboard and examined it as if he had just discovered it, but was not sure what it was.

"Where's my Duchess?" Kid Cato indignantly demanded.

"Where's Queenie's Mr. Flarf?" Maxie enquired.

"My Mr. Flarf! Well, I like that!"

"Course you do!"

"Now look 'ere, Maxie!"

"Well?"

"Mr Flarf——"

"Anyone mention my name?" said Mr. Flarf as he entered the public house. He was a good-complexioned man, well built, with sandy hair and a short little moustache. In his bowler hat and 'serviceable' mackintosh coat, he looked like the popular conception of a plain-clothes policeman. Mr. Flarf had a sense of humour. He was always telling people about it. "Blame my sense of humour!" he would say. His bright blue eyes would twinkle tolerantly. He liked pubs, talking to strangers and a good laugh. "A good laugh's a tonic". That was his motto. He told people about that, too. Mr. Flarf was an ideal customer for a public house. He exuded good-natured cheerfulness. He encouraged people to drink up and have another. He was a hail-fellow-well-met-and-the-laugh's-with-me-chap. Mr. Flarf lived in Streatham, but his head office was in Upper Regent Street and, in a tour of pubs one evening, with "some of the boys" on a night out, Mr. Flarf had been taken to the *Duke's Arms*. He liked it. He liked the atmosphere and he liked the size of it. Mr. Flarf could fit into it as a Shining Beacon, as a Jovial Character, an Uncrowned King. Mr. Flarf became a Big Personality at the *Duke's Arms*. His trips away on his firm's behalf were the cause of concern at the *Duke's Arms*, Armynter Court; for Mr. Flarf was conspicuous by his absence. Mr. Flarf was a Card. Queenie would like to think that Mr. Flarf came to the *Duke's Arms* because *she* was the presiding light there. She knew that this was not the truth, but she only admitted it to herself when she was 'half-seas over', on a Saturday night and felt that a bit of a cry would do her good. Mr. Flarf patronised the *Duke's Arms* because it suited Mr. Flarf.

"Good evening, all!" said Mr. Flarf, carefully placing his umbrella, (which he inevitably carried, rain or shine), on to the wooden-top table near Mrs. Starling and Kid Cato then drew off his gloves.

"Place hasn't changed much!" said Mr. Flarf. That always got a laugh. He had only been away two days.

"What was it like in Manchester, Mr. Flarf?" Queenie asked.

"What would it be like in Manchester?" Mr. Flarf asked her. They laughed again. Regular caution, Mr. Flarf.

Mr. Flarf turned to Kid Cato.

"My horse come in yet?" he enquired, genially. There was a fresh gale of laughter. Mr. Flarf "dropped" ten bob on a nag the day before he went away. Queenie, who had opened a light ale for him, put up the counter flap, and brought it across. Mr. Flarf rarely "propped up" the bar.

"Thank you, Queenie," he said, eying her speculatively.

"Figures haven't changed either!" he observed. Another laugh.

Max wiped his mouth and pulled his gangster-like hat over his eyes.

"Well, now that the wandering boy's returned, I'll get on my way", he said.

"Suit yourself!" said Mr. Flarf. "I'm not particular!"

They laughed again. A 'casual' customer observed, as casual customers often did, that "that gent.'s a rum 'un!"

Maxie did not like to leave as the recipient of someone else's joke, so he grinned without humour and pretended to sup up the remainder of his drink, consumed some while past.

Mr. Flarf took a long pull at his beer and then looked round with a conversational look in his eyes.

"Are they conscripting young Arthur?" he enquired.

"Arthur? What, Weak-minded Arthur?" Kid Cato asked, wondering what had detained his Priscilla.

"Yes."

"That's a good one!"

"Why, Mr. Flarf?"

"Nothing, only your Bert's teaching him how to use a Commando knife," Mr. Flarf told them.

"That's a silly fool thing to do!" Queenie said.

"P'raps I've got it wrong. Maybe he wants to pick his teeth with it. Or file his nails."

Bert was on the staff of the *Duke's Arms*. His hours were long, his work arduous. He was the one who washed out the pub in the early morning and he locked it up at night and cleaned it ready for the scrubbing he gave it in the morning. He was "off" from ten till opening time and, again, for an hour in the afternoon, before the public house opened again in the evening. He had lost an arm at the Arnhem landing. He was happy working at the *Duke's Arms*, and he spent most of his time hanging about the Court; it was as if he had travelled far enough in war-time and wanted to stay put. He lived above the pub's premises in a mean room which suited him. He spent the time he had "off" in the afternoons, lying on his bed reading paper-covered thrillers. His hate of war had not deadened his delight in a really nice novelette about murder.

"What's our Bert playing, silly tricks with poor, Weak-minded Arthur for?" Queenie asked the occupants of the bar, and clucked disapprovingly.

"P'raps I'd better 'ave a dekko." Kid Cato said, giving himself an excuse to go out into the courtyard, to see if he could sight Priscilla coming down Jermyn Street.

"Yes. Or we'll find Arthur's lopped off Bert's other arm!" Mr. Flarfy suggested.

Kid Cato walked out into the middle of the yard where Bert stood with Weak-minded Arthur under the lamp. The Commando knife was in Bert's hand and he was cursing furiously. It was difficult to ascertain immediately what Bert was up to, and Kid Cato ran across the intervening space calling out "Oil!"

Bert looked up and continued to curse. When the Kid reached him, he was able to see that Bert was busy cutting through some rope which secured Weak-minded Arthur to the lamp post. Arthur was smiling foolishly. He did not seem to mind.

"Bloody young fools!" Bert exclaimed.

"What's the idea?" Kid Cato asked belligerently.

"Little baskets!" Bert continued.

"Game!" Arthur explained. "Cowboys and—and . . ." He trailed off trying to remember.

"I'll say it's a game and a bloody silly one!" Bert replied, bending down to cut the cord binding Arthur's legs to the base of the lamp.

"Little bleeders!" Bert added.

"What's up?" Kid Cato asked him, impatiently.

"Those Terry boys and the little Casardi baskets."

"Did they do it?"

"Yes. Tied Arthur up here. Their idea of a joke. Don't know how long he'd 'ave been 'ere—"

"Not long. Plenty of people in the yard all the time," the Kid said.

"It's the idea of it," Bert turned on him angrily. "He doesn't want his mind churned-up with tying people up and fighting and all that!"

"No. You're right, chum," the Kid agreed.

"Knife!" said Arthur as Bert straightened up.

"Yes. Knife," agreed Bert. "And if I catch those Terry boys I'll hack a bit off their bums!" he announced, pugnaciously and lifting his voice, added: "And those dear little co-belligerents in this courtyard!" He glared at the Casardi café and, putting his knife in its sheath at the back of his belt, indicated with a nod of his head, for Arthur to follow.

"Better warm the bleeder up," he said.

Kid Cato nodded.

"I won't be a minute," the Kid told him. As Bert took Arthur into the *Duke's Arms*, Kid Cato went into Jermyn Street and looked up and down it, scowling and cursing the Duchess for keeping him waiting.

In the pub, blinking at the brightness and perplexed at the chorus of "Hallo, Arthur!" the weak-minded one tried to piece together what was occurring. Meanwhile Bert explained to the customers what had happened. Queenie gave Arthur a shandy "on the house" with the

explanation of this odd gift of: "Well, dear, 'e can't reely have a lemonade, seeing that 'e's a grown man, yet I don't want to shove 'im on the booze like, do I? It's a compromise!"

"Compromise, Queenie? Who's compromised you?" Mr. Flarf^y asked in a loud voice.

"Isn't it awful with 'im!" said Queenie, making more teeth and tongue noises, still trying to get the fish bone out of her top plate. Mr. Brember considered Mr. Flarf^y's remark and, long after the others had laughed, he gave a "Ha! Ha!" Then took off his spectacles and wiped them.

Max wanted to see the Commando knife. He, and one or two more, were examining it with Bert whose story, much embroidered since he had first told it in the early days of peace, was trotted out in short staccato bursts, liberally interspersed with "See's" ("Well, we was in the wood, see? An' Jerry knew this, see?"), while Arthur sipped his drink smiling foolishly and occasionally "coming to" in his mind with patches of sense ". . . knife . . . the Terry boys and the Casardi boys . . . we were playing Cowboys and Commandos . . . the Terry boys . . . now where was I going? Now where? . . . let me see . . . I must go . . . no, I think . . . what do I think . . . ? I must concentrate . . . er . . . er . . . knife . . . it's dark and it's light . . . clouds . . . We'll tie you up and you try and get out . . . I . . .")

When Brenda Swift entered the *Duke's Arms*, in a too-smart tailor-made suit and a fluffy jumper (which she hoped would look simple but was cut too expensively ever to be that), most of the customers were now listening to Bert and passing the Commando knife round, carefully trying its edge, holding it knowledgeably, and feeling the balance with profound nods. It was only after she had ordered a "light" and sat on one of the high stools by the bar that her presence, and her perfume, permeated the place.

Little Max, who was on the point of "shoving off", changed his mind in order to savour to the full this pleasant and out-of-the-ordinary addition to the clientele. Mr. Flarf^y, always anxious to establish to a wide circle of acquaintances his astonishing astoundingly quick good-natured banter and friendliness, beamed at her, after assuring himself that she was not One of Those. Mr. Flarf^y felt that, whereas it took all sorts to make up a world, a man did not talk to One of Those, unless, of course, it was in the privacy of their own locked rooms.

"Nice evening, Miss." He observed. The Oracle had spoken. Brenda Swift was received. The others followed Mr. Flarf^y's lead and greeted her with "Evenin's!"

Kid Cato, in a thoroughly bad temper, was somewhat mollified on his abortive trip to the end of the Court to look for Priscilla, to find himself on his return standing next to the orchidaceous young newcomer, who might have stepped straight out of a Technicolor epic ("Tish'un hair 'n' all. Smashin'", as Maxie put it, next day, as he gulped down a morning pint, between shaves). She smelt "ruddy gorgeous" (her perfume occasionally penetrated the Kid's hair-oil

barrage), and if Kid Cato had been told that she was born Brenda Smith of Long Acre and that her "old man" was a Covent Garden porter, he would have hotly denied the possibility. Whereas Brenda's presence caused a sudden respectful and embarrassed quiet in the bar (only Mr. Flarf was completely at ease), the arrival of Rory Malone, with the young lady at the Acting Place and her friend, was too much for one evening. As if to "cover up" their interest, the residents of Armynter Court and the *habitues* of the *Duke's Arms*, began to talk at once, loudly, and with attempted jocularity. Mrs. Starling and weak-minded Arthur did not, however, share this sudden garrulity, for no remarks were addressed to them.

"What'll you have?" Rory asked Kimmie, as casually as he could. Brenda Swift turned to appraise the newcomers.

She had once or twice seen the girls in the evening, presumably returning from work and idly she had wondered what they did. Their clothes were "good" and they were rather young. The man, slightly "arty", was an arresting figure with his raven hair and his moody eyes.

Queenie was the most surprised of them all in the *Duke's Arms* because, whereas Rory Malone was a frequenter of the house, the sudden arrival of the Saucy Piece in the tailor-made and the two young things Mr. Malone had brought in, was giving the place quite a different atmosphere; Queenie preferred the girls to come in with their student boy-friends—no, Queenie was not yet sure if she liked it. Queenie had always lorded it over them all at the *Duke's Arms*. Even when Mr. Flarf became a "regular", it was as if he were the Prime Minister, as it were, the presiding light, but a light that burned fully conscious that its brightness never at any time must completely dazzle the Queen's. Queenie quickly considered the matter as she went to fetch the orders, a great deal depended on Mr. Flarf. If Mr. Flarf thought "they fitted in", no doubt all would be well—that is, providing Mr. Flarf himself did not give way to the newcomers. "Atmosphere," Queenie remembered her former boss in Manchester observing, "is important in a public house."

Brenda, realising that the newcomers were, socially, at the same class level as herself and therefore might be useful as allies, half-smiled, to show that she was a friendly creature. Rory Malone said "Good evening" and wondered who she was. She looked the sort of girl he might have painted some time or other. An actress of sorts or a mannequin. Rory noted Max gawking by the dart board and Mr. Flarf seated next to the quiet Mrs. Starling and he nodded to them.

"Ah, there Mr. Malone!" Mr. Flarf said, to show to Brenda Swift that he knew and recognised the newcomer. "Not exactly alone, I see, this evening."

Maxie sniggered and Kid Cato, due to the embarrassing proximity of Brenda Swift, who gave him the appearance of having just stepped out of the toppest of drawers, suddenly emitted a much too loud guffaw which caused Brenda to jump, but she smiled in the manner people do

smile when they do not appreciate a "local" joke, but don't want to be thought stuffy.

Rory Malone flushed because, for a moment, he thought he was receiving the kind of criticism he had expected, but he recovered himself to introduce Kimmie and Dead Pan with a vague:

"Time we became acquainted with our neighbours."

Queenie, who had placed two shandies on the counter for the girls, thought it more than likely they were under age and wondered why she hadn't considered it before, and that if the pub served any more semi-soft drinks that evening it might as well give up and donate the space to the Milk Bar.

"Love thy neighbours!" Maxie tried, deciding that Mr. Flarfy should not be allowed to make all the wisecracks.

An angry flush appeared on Rory Malone's face. He turned to the bar and fumbled in his pocket to pay for the drinks. Kimmie who found the pub warm and friendly, thought that now that he had invited them for a drink, he could not pay for it and she flashed a quick look at Dead Pan who did nothing to help.

"Knifel!" suddenly exclaimed weak-minded Arthur in the quiet that followed Maxie's joke. It caused Mrs. Starling to spill her beer and brought on her palpitations.

"Now, Arthur!"

"Want to see knife . . . scalping . . ." He paused, creased up his brow, as if that would help him squeeze together the tangled threads within his mind and make a coherent fusion. "Playing Cowboys and Indians, we were!" he said and looked up expecting approval.

"O' course you were!" one-armed Bert assured him.

There was no need to explain to anyone in the bar about weak-minded Arthur except, perhaps, to the smart new miss. Mr. Flarfy and Kid Cato began to do this at the same time. The Kid persisted, since he was sitting next to her, and Mr. Flarfy tolerantly let him continue. He spoke in a low-voiced respectful way, as if not to hurt Arthur's feelings.

"Yes, I've seen him." Brenda told the Kid.

"Want to sell that knife?" Maxie asked Bert.

"Might do" Bert replied, non-committally.

Rory Malone, racking his brains for something to say to Kimmie, and to try and give the impression that they were old friends, said: "Plenty of colour here, I like it."

Kimmie nodded.

"When do you start to paint it?" Dead Pan asked.

Rory's eyes contracted slightly. She would!

"I'm just getting atmosphere, at the moment," Rory replied, gulping at the pint he had ordered.

"Sort of drinking it in!" D.P. could not help observing. She said it so wryly that she made Kimmie laugh.

Rory grinned, but not with his eyes.

"Yes, sort of!"

Bert had given Maxie the knife to re-examine and Arthur was gazing at it interestedly.

"Expensive tooth pick!" Mr. Flarf observed, drawing everyone's attention back to the knife. It gleamed, clean and sharp-edged, in Maxie's hands.

"Don't see no notches on it!" he observed.

"You try and notch that steel!" one-armed Bert replied.

"Oh put that blinking thing away!" Queenie said, going over to the radio set by the up-turned spirit bottles, and changing the dial to a new station. "Fair give me the creeps."

"That's right!" said Mrs. Starling, as if she, like a triangle player in a symphony orchestra, had waited all the evening to get her little piece in.

"Nasty but neat!" Rory observed. Kimmie and Dead Pan agreed.

To make conversation with Kid Cato sitting in a rather strained awe beside her, Brenda innocently enquired about the knife. The Kid began an important explanation about the use of a knife on a Commando raid. He was really warming up when Priscilla arrived to take him to the pictures. She was furious when she saw him with Brenda and hurried him out as soon as she could.

Mr. Flarf, who sensed that the matey atmosphere of the pub once again appeared in jeopardy, indicated the dart board and suggested to Brenda, "Now you youngsters. Let's see your mettle!"

Brenda, who was about to accept with eagerness, suddenly remembered that Ralph Checker would soon be at the flat and, finishing her drink quickly, apologised with a glance at her neat little wrist watch (a present from the Yankee Colonel inscribed on the back: "Brenda, you're the tops! Bart.")

"Awfully sorry," she said, "Must rush. See you again, of course."

"Right-you-are!" grinned Mr. Flarf affably, and Queenie, as if taking her cue from him added a "Tat-ta, dear. Come again!"

Mr. Flarf turned his attention to Rory Malone, Kimmie and D.P. who were not enjoying themselves to full capacity due to Mr. Malone's inability to find any subject that required anything but monosyllabic replies. Rory was tormented by the fact that, in his eagerness to prove to the *Duke's Arms* that his intentions were strictly honourable, he felt that not only did they suspect the worst, but that if he had not been so keen to white-wash himself, he could have taken the girls along to the *Sword and Pistol*, where he was relatively unknown and could have engaged them in lively conversation which would have put their acquaintance on a firmer basis.

"Come on, now, Mr. Malone. You're a dab at darts, I've seen you." Mr. Brember, the toy-yacht man, moved hastily away from the dart board.

"Not me!" Rory quickly replied.

"Oh I'd love to play darts!" Kimmie exclaimed.

"Well, that settles it!" said Mr. Flarf.

Mr. Flarf and Kimmie "took on" Dead Pan and Maxie. Max spent most of his time ogling Kimmie and Rory spent most of the game trying

to catch him at it. Weak-minded Arthur sat next to Mrs. Starling whilst Bert went down to the cellar on a job for Queenie. Mr. Flarfy was now able to keep up a lively running commentary on the play and Queenie, breathing on to the newly washed glasses, threw in a high-pitched cackle at his better sallies. Happiness at the *Duke's Arms* was restored.

Up in Armynter Court Mansions, Brenda turned the key of the flat and opened the front door, to find Ralph's hat and coat in the hall.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demanded irritably. "I've been here half an hour." He noticed her coat and skirt and the woolly jumper "And that's a funny thing to wear, isn't it?"

Brenda sighed. Some men thought a woman should be in something loose and slinky, all the time.

By insisting on paying for their 'round' and, by taking small sips of their drinks, Kimmie and Dead Pan were able to avoid letting Rory Malone stand them any more. The dart game proved amusing and they exchanged partners, and played another one, and even Dead Pan managed a slight flush on her pallid cheeks, due to the exertion and warmth of the pub. Maxie was full of "Oh nice shot, there, partner!" and "Now carefully does it partner!" and there was much ostentatious handing of the darts to Kimmie when it was her turn to throw which incensed Rory Malone. Then Kimmie, deciding it was time to leave, said with her usual directness:

"We would like to play again."

Queenie was quite charmed and very touched. (Queenie's emotions became somewhat unbalanced towards the end of an evening on duty).

"She's a dear!" she remarked when Rory Malone, self-conscious and frowning, escorted the young ladies out.

"You're telling me!" Maxie agreed. He began to use one of the dart points to clean his finger nails. He thought admiringly of her clear blue eyes, the flaxen hair, and the broad doll-like forehead.

He thought. 'Proper little bitch, but I don't like to see her with that painter chap. Still, if she'll have a drink with him, she'll have one with me, p'raps—and not next year, neither!'

In the courtyard, Mr. Casardi was having trouble with a young lady whom Mr. Flarfy would have called One of Those. She was heavily made up and wobbled on her high heels, whether because she had had too many drinks or because they unbalanced her, could not be ascertained. Mr. Casardi was storming at her.

"I don't argue, I call-a police. My café, he is respectable!"

"Are you sayin' I'm not respectable?" yelled the One of Those.

"I don't care wot-a you are. I don' ave none of that in my café!"

"None o' what?"

"Look-a, you wanna make trouble?"

"I gotta perfect right to sit 'n' finish my cup o' tea."

"Go away. Scram!" shouted Mr. Casardi. Rory looked at the two girls and smiled apologetically. Kimmie turned to Dead Pan:

"Life in the Big City," she said.

"I hope she'll shut up, I'm tired!" was all the observation D.P. made.

Rory found the girls puzzling. He would have thought the episode outside Casardi's would have embarrassed them. The evening had been something of an anti-climax for Rory. It had not somehow "gone" the way he had hoped. Mr. Flarfy ran the *Duke's Arms* and that meant that he wanted to be the centre of attraction there and at that time of night Maxie had usually gone home. Maxie *would* stick around when he saw the newcomers. It would have been a nice quiet evening, just a couple of drinks to establish a contact for another time, so that, when the girl Dippy was not present . . . oh, well. It was no good moaning. At least he had "met" them officially, and the *Duke's Arms* crowd knew that he had met them: that had been clearly established, which was a good thing. At Rory's landing, they paused.

"Well, it's been very nice, Mr. Malone," Kimmie said.

"I hope you and Dippy—"

"It's D.P.!" Kimmie corrected him. D.P. was on the point of adding "It's Miss Hockey-Marking to you!" but Kimmie must have sensed this, for she squeezed her arm.

"Oh, sorry. Well, I hope you weren't too bored."

"No, rather not."

"Then I'll say 'good night, neighbour!'" Rory said. He looked at Kimmie with eyes that D.P. found eloquent.

"Good night!" Kimmie replied, suddenly a little startled by the intensity of his gaze.

The girls clattered up to the next floor.

"I'm starving!" D.P. announced.

"Welsh rarebits and a cup of tea?" Kimmie suggested.

"Yum!" D.P. exclaimed, approvingly.

They set about preparing a meal. Suddenly Kimmie stopped and said:

"I wonder what he's doing now?"

"Lying on his bed, chewing the sheets!" D.P. suggested.

"Good heavens, why?"

"The guy's nuts about you!" D.P. told her.

"Who on earth are you talking about?"

D.P. turned her thumb down and indicated the flat below.

"Mr. Rory Augustus Malone!"

"Oh, I meant Michael. Is he? He did look at me rather queerly," Kimmie agreed, considering this.

"You don't really think he wants to put us in his painting of the pub, do you?"

Kimmie's face clouded.

"Oh."

"Don't tell me you're sorry?"

"No, but if he *is* keen . . . "

"Well—another beau to your string," D.P. said and then, as if realising what she had said, added "I say that's not bad. String to your bow, beau—I mean B-e-a—"

"I hope it's just a thing and not how I feel about Michael."

"I should have guessed you were spending the entire evening thinking of Michael!"

"Of course! But I am a bit worried about Mr. Malone," Kimmie told her. "Perhaps he'll have an affaire with that gay little mannequin number who popped into the *Duke's Arms*. I saw her giving him the once over," she added.

"I doubt it," D.P. replied. "He looked at you so intently, even I felt tired!"

"What a shame!" Kimmie observed and then added, "I suppose you don't think he's really keen on you, D.P.?"

"Listen!" D.P. replied. "Any man who called me Dippy twice could never be madly in love with me, now, could he? No, I'm afraid it's just another scalp for your belt."

"A pity!" Kimmie said without a trace of pleasure at a conquest and frowning at the bread. "He seems a nice enough chap. He's better looking than Michael but—"

"Oh for heavens sake!" said D.P. "Are we going to discuss your romantic life *all* the night?"

"I hope so!" Kimmie said.

"Ass!" D.P. replied, grating the cheese.

"Do you think he's at home now?" Kimmie asked mischievously.

"Oh, you're impossible!" D.P. told her.

"You said yourself he's very smooth."

"Of course he is. Now let's forget him." D.P. requested and added: "At any rate, for five minutes!"

Michael Dane was, however, thinking of Kimmie Blaxland. He had had dinner with a fellow member of his old R.A.F. squadron, a rich young man who was now back in the City, in a job which was proving rather irksome to him after his days of glory in the air. Michael had agreed to play squash with him but his friend had ricked his ankle, so the squash was off, they merely dined together. Michael could not stay late, he had promised to meet an American play producer at the Savoy Grill at eleven o'clock to discuss the London presentation of a big New York success which he wanted Michael to stage in the West-end. Michael's friend lived in the Albany and Michael decided to walk down to the Strand as it was a fine evening and he had not been able to get much exercise that day, due to the cancellation of the squash game.

He walked through Piccadilly and Leicester Square, thinking of the pleasure he got out of the jostling crowds and the neon signs and the hum of the London traffic. When he reached Long Acre, he turned into Bedford Street. He was sufficiently near to Broad Court to think of Banderton's and Banderton's brought to mind Kimmie Blaxland. He could see quite clearly in his mind, the grave way she listened when he talked, then the sudden smile, a dazzling, warm, glowing smile, as if a black-out curtain had suddenly fallen away and there was the sun, and of course, the dimple. He wondered if she would be an actress. It was

difficult to tell yet. She had a natural grace, she was very lovely and she was very keen. Well, he had talked to her, not just a question or two in class, but as a friend. 'I've talked to her'. He said to himself. 'She's sweet and charming and I like her as much as I thought I would. She's a darling.'

He crossed the Strand and walked down Savoy Court as the people streamed out of the Savoy Theatre, laughing, talking quickly and calling for taxis. He noted with satisfaction that the "House Full" boards were out. The theatre had one of his biggest successes playing there. He wondered if he would ever produce Kimmie Blaxland in a smash-hit. He contemplated the idea for the short time it took him to leave his hat with the cloak-room attendant and wash his hands.

She was a darling. He wondered if he was behaving badly in asking her to the Ballet. Well, he had asked them all. They were young and rather splendid. He was genuinely fond of all of them. Though, in a way, it was nice to think that the boys had refused the invitation. He was a little worried about that. He still wasn't sure in his mind why he had suddenly asked them out. At least, he corrected himself, he had a pretty good idea. She was a darling. She must remain a darling.

The American play producer waved to him from a table near the entrance to the Grill. Michael joined him. He dismissed Kimmie Blaxland from his mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KIMMIE was up early next morning, the excitement of their coming visit to the Ballet, coupled with the difficulty of sharing a single bed with Dead Pan—and remaining in it, caused her to shift early. Dead Pan, who must have been dreaming she was a mule, kicked out with surprising ferocity, and was sunk in so deep a sleep that Kimmie's half-hearted remonstrances, (for she hated the idea of waking her friend), were of no avail. It was lovely having D.P. to stay, but Kimmie's sleeping time invariably suffered. She was saving up to buy a camp bed but, somehow, there was always a badly-needed lipstick re-fill or a tin of Vim or some fully-fashioned stockings that just *had* to be acquired, and often acquired by debiting the old cigar box which Luff Blaxland had made into a money box for her years ago, and which was still in use, amended, of course, so that it could be opened at will.

Realising that Dead Pan would be furious if she were awakened a minute before it was absolutely necessary, Kimmie dressed quickly, put her hair into a silk handkerchief and crept out of the flat, tiptoed past Rory Malone's front door (in case he suddenly opened it and invited her in to breakfast) and, unbolting the main door of the small block of flats, moved out into the courtyard. As yet, only the early morning stoking at Armynter Court Mansions had begun. Kimmie walked into Jermyn Street along to St. James's Street and down towards Pall

Mall. London was very quiet and had a fine dignity in the early morning. She began to envy the dawn workers, the beauty of the city; then she considered the business of getting up in the darkness of winter, cold and grey dawns and icy chills, and she decided that, whereas these occasional snatches of the town's loveliness in summer were quite satisfactory, more than likely the early risers found very little attraction in the metropolis, in spite of its majestic mood. She was glad to be a Londoner; not just a person who lived out of London, like her own parents, for example, but a Londoner who lived in the heart of the big City. She wanted to travel, of course, and no doubt she would be doing plays on Broadway, but London was the place. She paused to admire the men's hats of former years exhibited in the front of Lock's and remembered that she had never seen Michael Dane in a civilian hat. A peaked hat suited him, worn, of course, with a Mountbatten tilt. She had seen a 'photo and he looked stunning in his R.A.F. cap. What a shame she had never known him then! One of the Few! How splendid that was. Those marvellous boys! Of course, she was really only a kid then, and Michael wouldn't even have noticed her—it had taken him long enough even now, at Banderton's, to realise she was alive. How splendid it was that the aces like Bader, Frank Carey, P. S. Turner and Sailor Malan and Michael and the others had come through it. She would have liked to have known Michael then, even if he had considered her a babe. Actually the chances weren't as remote as they might have been, she had been with Dead Pan and a party of young R.A.F. officers at the Palace on VJ night and one of them said he knew Michael Dane, and Dane had said he had every intention of being outside the Palace, but it was like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack. Just how much it was bravado and how much exhibitionism that prompted Kimmie to climb up on to the Palace gates and conduct the crowd's community singing of *There'll Always Be an England*, she would not like to say, she still blushed at the thought. All Michael had been to her was a series of cut-out photographs from newspapers and an old *Tatler* she had mutilated at the hairdresser's when she was under the dryer (and the assistant had gone out of the booth to complain that the customers got younger as the war proceeded). They had not met Michael outside "Buck House" on VJ night and it was Dead Pan who, a term later, when they were enrolled at the Banderton, brought in the astonishing news that Mr. Benson Banderton had "signed him up" for the staff of his dramatic academy. "The whole thing is Fate!" Kimmie pronounced. "My guardian Angel is looking after me."

"Well, make up your mind which it is!" D.P. had commented.

Yet, strangely, exasperatingly, Michael Dane was unaware of Kimmie Blaxland for simply ages. Then, suddenly, by good fortune, they read *Henry Vth* and Kimmie played the French Princess, alternating speeches with Joan Davidson. It was an embarrassing part, because she was shy of her French accent, but fortunately Charles Grafton was playing the King and he was not sharing his speeches. Charles, in reading the part, was as near the Laurence Olivier film

version as Charles could remember. He knew that he was good and he gave Kimmie confidence. The result was not unpleasing, and the rest of the class liked them. Michael Dane observed cheerfully: "Pretty tolerable!" and noted with regret that the attractive little miss with the lovely features and the superb "English rose" type of colouring would, no doubt, soon be scoring a big success in films. Michael Dane did not like the motion picture industry. It seemed a long time ago, now, Kimmie thought, since Michael Dane had told her that her reading was "Pretty tolerable." Yet, in reality, it was only a couple of terms. Progress was slow and so many girls were making a dead set for Michael. With Dead Pan Hockey-Marking in her corner, however, Kimmie did make progress: D.P. was an absolute wizard at elbowing and creating gaps in the masses of students who wanted to ask him questions after a lecture or to discuss a first night with him. The real difficulty was to try and be modest! When you loved a man you did not want to be modest! Diddy, her mother, (whom she called by her nickname,) might have other ideas, the generations seemed to have such wide chasms between them in so few years, but Kimmie could not see that it was anything but dishonest and hypocritical to pretend that she did not want Michael mentally and physically. Then, at this thought, as if the sentries outside St. James's Palace and Marlborough House were able to deduce, from her expression, what was in her mind, Kimmie blushed guiltily and peered intently down at the Mall. She walked into St. James's Park and inspected the flowers in their morning glory and admired the jewel-like beads of dew which had formed on the grass. Would Michael want to live in London or the country? Naturally, for his work, they would have a London flat, but did he *like* the country? Idly she walked by the lake and considered such matters as bright oiled silk or American cloth for the bathroom, and whether he liked very modern furniture or quaint, period stuff. What fun, what sheer heaven to be preparing a home! A church wedding with Michael — what a tremulous idea! And a honeymoon in Paris, of course, and back to the London flat while Michael put on a play, then down to the cottage for the week-end. It would be positively idyllic. The thing, of course, was to convince Michael that it would be wonderful. The thing, of course, was to make Michael realise that one breathed at all! Well, tonight was their first 'date'. If only . . . but Kimmie stopped herself with a stern rebuke. She found herself wishing that D.P. would suddenly wake up with a bad cold, so that she and Michael could have their first outing alone together. Kimmie hastened her pace back, going up the Duke of York steps, crossing Pall Mall and walking up Waterloo Place into Lower Regent Street, annoyed at her "mean thoughts". Her best friend, too! And D.P. had been the first to suggest "bowing out" if it hadn't been considered more tactical for her to be present; technique and all that. Kimmie hoped that she would not be "paid out" for such greed. How awful now if she were disappointed and Michael did not turn up. No, that *couldn't* happen! She had admitted her fault. She couldn't be punished for a wicked thought when she had admitted it?

Or could she? Oh, no! Please, no! She began to pray under her breath, noting as she passed the Plaza and turned into Jermyn Street, that there was a new Bing Crosby picture playing.

When Kimmie reached Armynter Court, the yard was waking up. The milkman was clinking away. He called out a cheery: "Going to be a fine day, Miss!"

Maxie was taking down his shutters and had already an unkempt customer waiting for his razor.

"Good morning, partner!" Max called out breezily. "Been 'aving your mornin' dip in the Serpentine?"

"Of course!" Kimmie agreed.

Maxie, taking a cigarette out of his mouth, flicked the ash off it, saying to his potential customer, in an undertone with the customary admiration: "Proper little bitch!"

Em and Carry had finished their work in the Milk Bar where Min was busy getting ready for the first breakfasts. Em and Carry, dressed for home, were both smoking, to show their independence and they waddled off with suspicious parcels under their arms.

Priscilla called out "Mornin' Judy Garland! You just come 'ome?" and one-armed Bert sluicing down the front of the *Duke's Arms* whistled cheerfully. Mr. Brember, the toy-yacht man, walked across the Court for a constitutional, before his breakfast at the Milk Bar, raised his bowler hat and coughed nervously. Another day had begun at Armynter Court.

Kimmie, waking D.P. with a cold sponge, after three shakings had proved of no avail, asked her anxiously how she felt.

"Never felt better in my life!" D.P. assured her, yawning as she said it. Kimmie did not know whether she was relieved or upset by this answer.

"I could even face Min's salmon pink uppers this morning," D.P. continued, getting quickly out of bed, and making a line for the wash basin. She made a great show of pouring out cold water and dipping her face into it. "You can tell the Reporters that I am positively bursting with good health! I slept like a log! Why no morning tea?" D.P. demanded to know.

"We're late!" Kimmie explained.

"Did you oversleep?" D.P. enquired.

"No. I went for a walk," Kimmie confessed.

D.P. turned her wet, white face and opened her eyes in astonishment.

"It must be love!" she said.

The girls were somewhat out of breath when they reached Broad Court, the faithful Eustace was standing at the corner of Broad Street awaiting them. He pointed at his watch and gestured that they should hurry.

"Your loyal swain!" D.P. remarked.

"Yes. He is rather sweet. But, frankly, I'm a little surprised to see him this morning," Kimmie confessed.

"Expect a fit of the sulks?"

"Yes I did, rather."

"Don't worry. He's a masochist," Dead Pan said, with knowledgeable conviction.

"Good heavens, what's that?"

"When you're as old as me, dearie—" D.P. began.

"Don't be an ass, D.P."

"Well as wise, then!"

"I'm not sure I want to be," Kimmie told her.

"Good morning Mr. Harradine!" D.P. greeted Eustace.

"Hallo D.P.! Good morning, Kimmie! You're late!"

"Hallo, Eustace!"

"Going to be a nice day," he said, trying not to look at Kimmie's black two piece with the white frilly blouse and the cameo brooch, the ensemble she had chosen for the evening's outing.

"Yes. Rather."

They hurried towards Banderton's.

"What did you do last night?" D.P. enquired (the daily ritual!).

"We—er—had a few drinks and I went to the Monseigneur newsreel."

"What about the others?"

"When I left them, they looked as if they were going to make a night of it," Eustace told them. "What did you do?"

"Played darts with some artists," D.P. told him, quickly getting her version in, before Kimmie had a chance.

Eustace eyed them in astonishment. "Where . . . er . . . old friends of yours?"

"You know—Rory Malone and his crowd," D.P. continued, as if she were speaking of an internationally known personality. Kimmie's look of surprise was as big as the one Eustace gave Dead Pan. D.P. did not mind. 'She's delicious—as white and impervious as a goose!' Kimmie thought.

"Oh, yes, rather!" Eustace agreed weakly. Then, jealousy consuming him, enquired:

"You didn't go to his studio?"

His horror of such bohemianism, and the fear that Kimmie might have been contaminated, was comically pitiful; Kimmie hastily put him out of his misery.

"No. We were at our local."

"Your local?" Eustace repeated, horrified at the idea of his love being a frequenter of taverns. 'Heavens!' thought Eustace, 'out of the frying pan slap-bang into the fire!' D.P. was grinning almost evilly.

"Oh just a quick one—like you had, Eustace," D.P. tormented.

"Oh, yes. Yes, I see," Eustace replied. He did not see at all. He would not be happy until he had achieved a West-end success on the stage and was able to marry Kimmie and take her away from all the 'artistic' life which was not really good for her. One member of a

family was enough to have working in the Theatre and, much as he worshipped Kimmie, *he* was the one whom he visualised as the big London star. At the moment, of course, she was infatuated by an older man. He must be patient with her; but it was very difficult.

The three reached the Great Hall just before the doors were closed and locked. (You had to apologise to Mr. Benson Banderton himself, if you missed prayers). Harry Barlow and Charles Grafton were conspicuous by their absence.

"I say, do you think Harry and Charles are under the weather?" Kimmie whispered to Eustace. He had expected some such question for he yammered a little and replied that he did not think so. Dead Pan saw them further down the Hall and nudging Kimmie, pointed them out to her.

"They are taking a dim view of you," D.P. told her. Kimmie nodded. She was unhappy that they were unhappy. She wanted their friendship. Why couldn't they be reasonable? She could not help her feelings for Michael Dane. She wanted Michael as her Beau and the friendship of the boys. That was not much to ask; but men, somehow, never believed in platonic friendships. She sighed. Life was so *complicated* sometimes. When the hymn started she whispered to Dead Pan:

"Would you say that Harry and Charles were masochists?" she enquired. She wondered why D.P. giggled sacrilegiously through the whole hymn.

"I've never known you show so much emotion!" Kimmie could not resist saying.

"Beast!"

"Well, *are* they?"

"I must buy you Mr. Freud!"

"Is he expensive?" Kimmie enquired mischievously. D.P. instantly searched for her handkerchief to prevent the explosions of mirth from being heard above Mr. Banderton's prayer. She was afraid Miss Kinsman or Mr. Oliphant might be conscious of her bad behaviour and report her. Miss Wentworth was far too weak to report anybody. Miss Wentworth, of course, was singing slightly out of the side of her mouth so that her breath would not 'offend' Mr. Oliphant who was next to her on the staff rostrum.

The two girls did not see the rest of the Frightful Five again until lunch time, they had an all-female morning and the boys had a morning 'on' the French Theatre, which comprised two lectures by members of the *Comédie Française*—a visit arranged by Mr. Banderton (no expense being spared to assure that pupils at the Banderton had the *best*).

When they all met at the front of the academy, Charles and Harry, trying to look casual and defiant, succeeded only in looking not very well and hollow-eyed. Dead Pan's bottle-green dress and Kimmie's black two-piece were immediately noticed but not mentioned. Greetings were more formal than usual.

"Where'll we lunch?" Harry asked. Harry was always the first to

try to "negotiate", to "smooth over" any differences of opinion or arguments.

"They've got some jolly good sandwiches at the *Hind's Head*," Charles said, "and I need a drink, my mouth's like the bottom of a—" He caught a steely glare from D.P.

"Of a—piece of wet flannel!" he concluded, lamely.

"I say!" Kimmie explained, brightly, trying as desperately, this time, to conclude a peace with negotiator Harry Barlow. "That's nifty!" She indicated a new sports coat which Harry was wearing as if it were floodlit.

"Nifty!" scowled Charles. His good-looking face was tired and dissipated.

"What's wrong with 'nifty'?" D.P. leapt to the defence of Kimmie.

"It is rather 'smack on', isn't it?" Harry agreed, with pleasure.

"You could practically *play it* on your gramophone," D.P. suggested cuttingly.

"I like it!" Harry told her firmly.

"So do I," Kimmie sided with him, although she thought it was hell.

"They call it a Paul Muni Casual—or was it a Cary Grant?"

"It looks like a Lyons ice cream fudge," D.P. told him, unkindly.

"Now, if your bow tie was maroon," Kimmie continued, trying to be 'matey' and interested. Harry's hand promptly flew to it.

"I'm sorry about the tie," he explained uneasily, "I think my old man swiped my fawn one."

"Are we going to spend all the morning discussing Harry's sartorial splashes—?" Charles began.

"Sartorial splashes!" mimicked D.P.

"Or are we going to eat? I'm ravenous!"

None of the boys would say that they did not want to go to Uncle Joe's (Michael Dane might be there a second time), but it was obvious that that was the way they felt. Nevertheless, Kimmie and Dead Pan did not want to eat sandwiches and swill down beer. Usually, there was complete agreement and, as a rule, they automatically followed the first suggestion that came along, but not on this occasion.

"I'm not going to a pub," said D.P. with so much squeamishness that Eustace was forced to add:

"What's the matter with pubs, you seemed to like them last night!"

"That was different!" D.P. replied haughtily, as if she had stood Royalty a lager.

"I think I'll go to the *Hind's Head*," Charles repeated.

Kimmie, noticing the first sign of a rift, was worried; they were all such good friends together, she so badly wanted them to remain that way, she was on the point of debating in her mind whether to give way and agree to lunch at the public house when Dead Pan, cutting the Gordian knot of indecision with her usual clear-cut, announced:

"You others can go where you please, I'm going to the Russell Street Lyons," she said firmly. There was an ominous pause and then Harry said cheerfully:

"Well, that sort of solves it!"

"O.K." said Charles, suddenly.

"Suits me!" agreed Eustace.

"What are we waiting for?" Kimmie added. And the Frightful Five went off to lunch.

"If Michael Dane's there, I'll probably murder him!" Harry whispered to Charles, as they crowded into the café.

About the time that Kimmie and her cohorts were eating their lunch in Covent Garden, Brenda Swift, her red hair down to her shoulders, was sitting up in bed at Armynter Court Mansions, sipping orange juice and asking Mrs. Nebbings, her "daily" woman, what sort of a day it was going to be. Mrs. Nebbings, a big-boned woman with a face that showed the sadness in her life, (her two sons killed at St. Nazaire and her husband in a London blitz whilst on Home Guard duties), spoke quietly, with a whipped-up enthusiasm she soon dropped when she left the luxury apartment and walked back across St. James's Park to her home in Page Street, S.W.1. There was no envy or avidity in Mrs. Nebbings, just regret. What would she want with a fine flat? No bitterness, now. She worked because she needed a little money. This job was suitable in that she was well paid, she did not have to go to work until mid-day and she was not 'bossed'. Mrs. Nebbings, bovine, saturnine creature, had not much interest in her life nowadays; but she knew that people did not want sadness: people did not employ workers who moped. She replied to Brenda's question, as she peered out of the window, screwing up her eyes as the sunlight shone through the casement:

"It's going to be beautiful. A beautiful morning, mum!" she observed, thinking that, since she had already had her mid-day meal, the day was half over. Well, if Miss Swift wanted to lie in bed until lunch time and then have breakfast, Mrs. Nebbings did not mind. Everyone according to how it suited them, as it were. Miss Swift was an actress, she believed. That was why she slept late. Miss Swift also had an 'attachment', but Mrs. Nebbings was broad-minded. The 'attachment' merely meant a bit of extra washing up, sometimes, two cups instead of one, or an extra cocktail glass and the pyjamas and dressing gown to put back in the closet, but otherwise Mrs. Nebbings shrugged her shoulders. What did it matter?

Brenda yawned and shook her head, nearly spilling the orange juice. She closed her eyes and opened them again, widely to awaken herself. They were greeny-grey and in some lights looked speckled, flecked with fawn. She looked appealing and cat-like as she sat up in the big double bed and the pastel-coloured sheets made her appear 'a proper treat', even Mrs. Nebbings had to 'allow' that. Mrs. Nebbings often used the word 'allow' when she was talking to her cronies at Tothill House, Page Street. "Well, I'll allow you that," she would say, admitting a point to her friend Mrs. Sage, who worked as a cleaner at the Admiralty. She 'allowed', mentally, that Brenda looked very nice.

Brenda felt splendid. Ralph had left in the early hours of the morning and Brenda had slept like a log until Mrs. Nebbings had come in at twelve and pulled back the heavy brocaded curtains and announced: "It's twelve o'clock, Mum!"

There was nothing better than a good sleep! So it was going to be a fine day. Well, that was nice. She might ring up Judy Gwendolyn and see if they could get Bertie O'Toole-Carruthers to drive them to Windsor for tea. Bertie, known to his friends as "Strawberry", on account of his 'school girl' complexion, was in the Life Guards and stationed at the Knightsbridge Barracks. Or they might even have a ride in Hyde Park. Brenda did not really enjoy horse-back riding, but Mr. Chalu, who was the riding master, cut a fine figure as he escorted them slowly round Rotten Row and, when Judy wanted to gallop, Mr. Chalu was satisfied to trot gently with Brenda. Mr. Chalu's eyes showed very definite admiration for Brenda Swift. He was tall and lean, and he had a nice tanned "out-door" complexion. He obviously took considerable time and patience over his shaving. She often wondered if she would enjoy watching Mr. Chalu shave. She rather thought that she would. She pictured, sometimes, the clean sweep of his razor as it sped the lather away in strong, definite strokes, leaving the skin very clear and the blood underneath it pounding at the surface, resentful, perhaps, that it could not escape. (Mr. Chalu was not the sort of man who cut himself. Mr. Chalu would, no doubt, be contemptuous of Ralph's electric razor). Mr. Chalu was lithe and a very active man, not leisurely like most tall men. He smelt strongly of horses and leather, but it was not unattractive to Brenda. She imagined Mr. Chalu would always be the sort of man she considered doing something about, a rather pleasing idea, someone you might get to know more intimately, a rather tantalizing possibility of more amusing things . . . but probably she never would.

Well, there was a choice of a car ride, a ride in the Row, there was a new Bing Crosby movie at the Plaza, and they could have a long lunch at a nice, expensive restaurant. Afternoons could be very pleasant indeed. Ralph was a busy boy in the afternoons and it meant you could *plan*. Brenda knew that what her life lacked was a chance to plan. What made her happiness complete this morning was that Ralph had told her he had an engagement that night. It meant that she could do something rather than sit around waiting . . . waiting . . .

Ralph had been livid that she was out the previous evening and kept him hanging about for a few minutes. She did not give him any explanation, nor did she mention the *Duke's Arms*, and so Ralph sulked until after he had had his bath and a double-whisky on the seat of the Thing, then, he felt better. Her new nightie probably had helped his mood to pass off.

The telephone bell pealed importantly and Mrs. Nebbings went across and answered it. 'Goodie', thought Brenda. She loved people ringing up. People should telephone more often. Some of her happiest hours had been spent on the telephone. She often 'nattered' to her

Yankee Colonel, lying under the bed on a mattress with an American pudding-basin-like helmet on her red head, whilst the Flying Bombs went over. And the telephone often saved her reading the papers, *some-one* usually read the news and told it to her, when he, or she, rang up.

"It's Miss Judy Gwendolyn, Mum!" Mrs. Nebbings said, handing the telephone across to Brenda.

"Hallo, darling!"

"Hallo, darling!"

"What's new?"

"Nothing. What's new with you?"

"Nothing, except I went out to a pub last night and played darts and Ralph was simply furious."

"Who did you go with?" Judy asked.

"Oh, a gang of people," Brenda replied, vaguely.

"Sounds frightful!" decided Judy, aping the sort of women the Captain O'Toole-Carruthers men eventually married.

"It was not. It was definitely amusing," Brenda told her. The 'definitely' was part of the O'Toole-Carruthers jargon, and Brenda wanted to show that she had her Captains, too. And Colonels. Sometimes. Though, with Brenda, one was not bounden to one type. Men, for Brenda, were like Licorice Allsorts.

"Are you free?" Judy asked.

"Yes."

"Oh, what fun! What shall we do?"

"Well, my Mrs. Nebbings says it's going to be a wonderful day—"

"I know, darling, so I thought if we could get Strawberry, we might go and see the Polo."

Neither Judy nor Brenda would ever admit that, to them, Polo was rather a bore. Better than cricket, of course: but a bore, nevertheless. The good thing about it was that it gave a girl an opportunity to wear her summery frocks and the Quality went to the Polo. Brenda had not been initiated into the splendours of this sport before the war, her progress in the social scale had spurted only when Europe was in the throes of Armageddon. Sometimes, she wished she had a friend she could be honest with and say that watching men doing almost anything was a crashing way to spend an afternoon. Polo had only just begun to get back into its stride and, therefore, it was understandable that one had to spend a certain amount of time watching it. Motor racing was almost as bad, it was noisy and only occasionally exciting to Brenda, who really preferred a nice seat at the Odeon, Leicester Square, or a visit to the greyhounds. However, Brenda dutifully agreed.

"Strawberry wants us to go out with him tonight anyway. That's, if you possibly can!"

"Yes. Actually I was just going to ring you, darling. Ralph's out of town and I wondered if we couldn't all see a flick?" Brenda suggested. (She called it "pitchers" when she was Brenda Smith, "movies" when she had been with her Shaef Colonel, and "flicks" for Judy Gwendolyn and Company).

"Oh, no, my dear," Judy instantly replied. "Strawberry's got a perfectly marvellous idea. I'll tell you all about it when I see you. It's a scream!" Judy assured her. Whilst Brenda was replying expressing "intrigued interest", Judy frowned, realising that "it's a scream" was probably not quite the phrase she should have used. She searched her memory desperately for the word Strawberry O'Toole-Carruthers had used.

"Will you ring me when you've checked with Strawberry?" Brenda concluded.

"Yes, darling," Judy agreed and then, suddenly the word came to her. She added, triumphantly: "You'll adore the idea. It's a terrific *jape*!" she said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MR. OLIPHANT (BINGO) was in charge of Sheridan's *The Critic* that afternoon and, to the surprise of the other members of the Frightful Five, (and, indeed, to the surprise of Bingo Oliphant and the rest of the class), Eustace Harradine suddenly showed signs of real thespian talent as *Mr. Puff*. It shook handsome young Charles Grafton a great deal; Harry Barlow, his chubby shining face wreathed in smiles, was as pleased as if he had scored the success himself; Kimmie was delighted and Dead Pan Hockey-Marking said that unless a pupil at the Banderton did not run the whole gamut of the emotions from *Clytemnestra* to *Eliza Doolittle*, they never *did* think you could do anything.

Somehow Eustace's triumph ameliorated the rift caused by Michael Dane's offer; it was as if, in sharing Eustace's satisfaction in delivering a good reading, the Frightful Five had arrived back again at the same level; the girls were back 'in the Commons' once more, and Michael Dane's invitation suddenly became the invitation of a tutor to his pupils: the menace of Michael Dane seemed to have disappeared as suddenly as it had loomed upon their horizon; at any rate for the boys. Kimmie had reached a sudden calm, after her sleepless night and early morning walk, and D.P. watchful and slightly detached about the engagement, was "letting Nature take her course", as she told Kimmie when they went to powder and get ready for their departure. In a spirit of mutual admiration, (we're all good chaps at Banderton's), the boys wished the girls a pleasant evening, and made a few rather lame but good-natured jokes about teacher's pets, then departed to see if they could get into the pit of the new Olivier show, forgetting that they had all expressed regret to Michael that they had separate engagements in the metropolis. Kimmie did not even notice it, and D.P. smiled to herself, but said nothing.

The girls were ready early and D.P. was despatched every few moments to look outside the main door of the academy to see if Michael had arrived, whilst Kimmie remained in the cloakroom,

occasionally popping into one of the compartments if any girl came in: it would not do to be seen hanging around for Michael. Whilst she waited every minute seemed an hour, and Kimmie now began to have doubts about the whole evening. She began to panic slightly; perhaps Michael had made no arrangements, and had forgotten them. She would *die* if it got round that they had been let down by him. She would never be able to look Joan Davidson in the face again! Or, if he did turn up, he would have misunderstood about the boys not coming and he would call the evening off, until such time as they could all go. Oh, no! That wasn't what she wanted at all! Periodically Kimmie peered into the mirror in the cloakroom and fiddled with her hair, turned her profile to the glass and, with her compact mirror, tried to see if the back of her head was all right. Going out with Michael! Her first 'date' with Michael Dane! Exciting moment. But *why* should he choose to meet them outside Banderton's? Nothing romantic about *that*! Obviously, it was to prove to Banderton's that there was nothing serious about the date. Obviously, there would not be anything serious, had he not asked the three boys along, too? Or was it the *double bluff*? Was it to fool Banderton's that he was ostentatiously meeting Kimmie outside the main door? That must be it. *But . . .* Oh dear! oh dear. But me no buts! If only she *really* knew how he felt about her. He must be a bit keen to have suggested the Ballet; but, then again, it was a gesture, made after the lunch at which they had inadvertently split a table, a casual idea only. Oh Crippen! suppose he never expected them to take him up on it? Suppose he was going to be bored to tears? Oh, flick it! No; he wouldn't be! Well, if he was, *she* couldn't help it. It was her evening. She felt as she was sure Mrs. Palmer must have felt when King Charles the Second sent for her the first time or—

"He's here!" D.P. announced dramatically, pushing open the cloakroom door.

"Oh, Lawks!" exclaimed Kimmie, suddenly adopting one of her father's favourite school-boy expressions.

"Don't be an ass!" D.P. continued. "He's *keen*. Don't you realise? He's *keen*! I can *tell*!" she assured her friend. She felt like the coach in an American football film. If Eustace Harradine had been present, he would have said: "Go in and win, kid!"

"Well, why did he . . . ?" Kimmie began.

"Now for heaven's sake don't start having the vapours. If it was a first night—"

"*What?*"

"Of a show, you ninny,—you'd have to be composed! Just because a man asks you out to a theatre—" D.P. said, with feigned contempt.

"You're right!" Kimmie replied, pulling herself together. "The honour of Banderton's is at stake!"

"The honour of womanhood is at stake," D.P. amended it.

"Let's go!"

Then, suddenly, miraculously, there was a calm. Michael was

outside, hat in hand talking, (oh joy!) to Joan Davidson. He was wearing a dark blue double-breasted suit and a hard white collar and R.A.F.V.R. tie, a white silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, gloves and a rolled umbrella. Somehow she was always to remember the rolled umbrella. It was, somehow, so unlike Michael. He brought it in case the weather suddenly changed (there was the oppressive feeling of thunder in the air), and in case the girls had not brought coats.

It was a happy, triumphant moment for Kimmie. Michael concluded his conversation with Joan Davidson, who had lingered in the telephone booth outside Banderton's, just to see him when he came out, and pretending to make calls. He smiled a welcome to Kimmie and D.P. and said to Joan Davidson:

"Sorry I didn't know you were free, you could have joined us."

Even this did not worry Kimmie. She was composed outside and suddenly joyously serene within. Of course, it was just a sop, it was to prove to Banderton's nice Joan Davidson that it was all just a pleasant evening. It was to alleviate the envy that Joan Davidson was undergoing. It was to dispel the poison she would instil in the Banderton morning elevenses! Phooey to Joan Davidson! Pish and tush to Banderton's!

We're on our way! I'm going to the Ballet with Michael Dane, my love-to-be; my husband-to-be!

They dined at a rather small but obviously select restaurant in Charlotte Street, where Michael had reserved a table. The atmosphere was 'continental' but quiet; Peter, a dignified little Armenian with a depressed face, a drooping moustache and sad, dog-like eyes, who wore an impeccable white shirt with a generous amount of cuff showing, greeted Michael by name and conducted them personally to their table in an alcove where, once they were seated, he presented both the young ladies with gardenias.

Michael ordered for them and D.P., looking round the room, noticed a much-publicised Member of Parliament dining a rather faded actress at one table, an effeminate dress designer, whose work was having a passing vogue, at another and, at a third, an author of very Left Wing tendencies was proving to a titled aristocratic lady that he was no snob in regard to the company he kept.

Kimmie preferred to watch and listen to Michael order the meal. Definite, concise instructions, with a charm that would melt the toughest of war-time servants and now, in peace time, positively doubled the obsequious waiter into a fawning question mark of servility. As Michael ordered, Kimmie admired his razor-keen face; the way two little lines, like cuts, appeared above the bridge of his short nose when he frowned; the amazing alertness of his eyes; the grin of approval when Peter himself brought them aperitifs, a grin slightly cynical by war reaction, perhaps, and the desire to strike the right balance, the proper perspective, over his success.

The dinner was "just right"; a pilaffe, a mushroom omelette, an

ice cream and coffee. The conversation was "just right", too: Bander-ton talk and a discussion on the new Emlyn Williams show.

They arrived just as the lights were lowered and the coughing and fidgeting stopped as the orchestra played the introductory music.

They were several rows from the front and four seats in the row immediately ahead of them were empty.

"Hope they stay like that!" D.P. whispered.

The performance was *Coppélia* and Kimmie, enchanted by the music, her hand resting casually on her knee, where it just *might* be grasped by Michael's but, of course, nothing *obvious*, was beginning to have a glorious feeling of tranquillity and internal splendour when four late-comers, two women and their escorts, expensively arrayed, perfumed and pomaded, noisy, sniggering and a little arrogant in their attitude to the rest of the audience, as if they wanted to point out that although a show was advertised for a certain time, it should not start until *all* the audience were in their seats, trod on toes, swept wraps across the carefully attended hair of the women in the row in front, and brushed past people, without a word of apology. They plunked down in the vacant seats in front of Michael, Kimmie and D.P.

"What *fun* my dear!" said one of the women in a too loud voice.

"A divine idea of your's, Strawberry!" said the other woman.

Kimmie thought she recognised the voice.

One of the men, with a very pink and white complexion, fair bristly moustache and a vast frame, boomed out in reply:

"You wait until you see the men, Old Girl! Awful little pansies, give you a big laugh!" he said.

They giggled a little alcoholically at this. Kimmie frowned, she recognised the back of the head of the first woman, she turned to Dead Pan just as D.P. was about to whisper to her.

"The mannequin type from the pub last night!"

"Yes!"

"Well I'm damned!"

"I don't think I'm going to like them!"

"I'm sure I'm not."

There was much scuffling of wraps being removed and coughs and "Whoops my dear!" as Brenda Swift dropped her programme, and then Judy Gwendolyn sniggered as people began to shush them, and said loudly:

"Divine people. They're all so serious!"

Kimmie threw a quick glance in Michael Dane's direction. She could see that he was intensely annoyed. When Franz made his first appearance in Act One, significant looks passed between the two men in front and Captain Strawberry O'Toole-Carruthers said:

"There you are, what did I tell you!"

"It takes all sorts to make a world!" Judy suggested.

"I won't be able to stand this *all* the evening," the other man said. "I'm warning you, I'll have to go out pretty soon," he added.

It was then that Kimmie realised just how furious Michael Dane

could be. He leaned forward and remarked crisply and with calm tenseness:

"I'm warning you, sir, you'll go out even sooner if you don't be quiet!"

The effect was electric. The foursome took a moment or two in their minds to verify that they had been rebuked. They looked at one another in surprise which mounted into indignation.

"Bloody sauce!" Judy said, then bit her lip. *Hardly* the word to go with 'jape'.

"I beg your pardon sir?" Captain Strawberry O'Toole-Carruthers turned his bulky frame and glared at Michael.

"If you and your party don't be quiet and behave yourselves—out you go!" Michael told him. He was white with rage and his jaw jutted out ominously. There were a few murmured "Hear hears!" from nearby members of the audience who had disapproved of the late-comers, and there were more shushes and one cry of "Order!"

"Are you addressing me, sir?" Strawberry asked disbelievingly, his nick name now could more appropriately be Tomato.

"I am, sir. *And* your chums. If you don't like it, go somewhere else!"

"Well, I'm damned!"

"Now be a good boy, and be quiet," Michael concluded.

The gallant Captain's mouth opened and closed like a newly landed fish. He gulped and turned back in perplexity, as if seeking support from Judy Gwendolyn. Meanwhile Brenda Swift, turning to survey the upholder of democracy, caught sight of the blue-eyed blonde girl whom she had met in the *Duke's Arms* the previous evening, and exclaimed:

"Oh, hallo!"

She turned back to Judy.

"Good heavens, I know them!" she said.

"What?" they exclaimed, in concerted amazement.

"Yes. Too embarrassing!" said Brenda.

"Are you going to be quiet?" Michael enquired with growing fury. Kimmie's heart began to pound. D.P. clutched her arm. A "scene" would be most unpleasant.

Brenda turned back and looked at him for some time before replying. She was surprised to find instead of a tougher, bigger man than the powerful Captain O'Toole-Carruthers, a slim, good-looking youngish man, lithe, but not heavily built, with a very alive face, hair neatly slicked back from a broad forehead, as if he took trouble to get it right in the morning, and then deliberately forgot about it for the rest of the day, eyes that flashed indignantly and nostrils which flared from a short decisive nose. He had something besides annoyance. He had a kind of magnetism. She did not know what prompted her to say:

"Cave man!" But she said it, casually, rudely, with complete self-confidence. An indolent, a provocative "Cave man!"

Michael was taken by surprise. He now looked startled and, as if chip on shoulder, waited for an appreciative laugh from the others. His fists clenched. But, as if in anticipation of an appreciation of her sally, Brenda quickly said:

"We must be good. We really must. *All* these people like this sort of thing!"

A commissionaire appeared in the gangway accompanied by a programme girl who sibilantly announced and pointed out the recalcitrants.

There were further shushes, chiefly directed at the programme girl now, and suddenly, after a surly:

"O.K.! O.K.!" from the indignant deflated Captain O'Toole-Carruthers, the audience settled down to enjoy the Ballet.

For the first few moments, Michael still glared at the people in front of him. Kimmie, her heart beginning to beat more normally, longed to pat his hand. Wow! but he certainly put them in their place—especially the big ox of a man with the red face. But what did the girl from the pub mean by "Cave man"? It was difficult to tell if she was "for" Michael or against him. At any rate, they were very docile now. There would probably be words in the interval. Oh, never mind that! The lovely music and the enchanting dancing, it was all too good to miss. She must savour every minute of it, with Michael by her side! Oh but he'd a temper when he was roused! Golly, but he was marvellous! No wonder he had been one of the R.A.F. aces—he certainly shot that big oaf down in flames!

By the middle of the act, Kimmie was able to forget about the party in front and to let the dancing and the music take possession of her mind. She felt she would like the Ballet to go on for hours.

At the first intermission, whether because the joke had palled, or because of the rebuff Michael had given them, Kimmie could not judge, but the ruddy-complexioned heavily built young man, said, in a voice which he considerably lowered in relation to the tone he had used when they first arrived:

"I can't take much more of this, I vote we go somewhere and dance."

The others, as if this gave them a chance for a strategic withdrawal without too much loss of face, promptly agreed. The other man, as if to show his independence proclaimed: "The women in this have legs like pianos and faces like the backs of trams and the men are a bunch of screaming fairies!"

"Still," Judy said quickly, "We did have a laugh!"

"What about a drink?" the man called Strawberry suggested.

They studiously avoided looking at Michael and the two girls. But, as they got up, ostensibly to get a drink but, of course, the women taking their wraps and the men their hats, Brenda Swift, letting the others proceed ahead of her to the gangway, leant over and, smiling pleasantly at Kimmie, remarked in a low voice:

"I should have taken them to the *Duke's Arms*!"

Kimmie, surprised at her friendliness and her willingness to accept, the fact that they were at fault, smiled back at her and said:

"I think they would have enjoyed it better!"

Then, Brenda Swift, turning to Michael Dane, surprised them even further.

"I'm so sorry!" she apologised, and followed the others out.

"Well I'm damned!" Michael exclaimed, "Who is your extraordinary friend?"

"We met her for the first time last night—at Kimmie's 'local,'" D.P. told him.

"I think she lives in the rather grand block of flats in our courtyard," Kimmie told him.

"Surprising, soignée and——" Michael, mollified by her admission of rudeness and the graceful way she apologised, searched for a third word to complete his alliteration.

"Saucy?" Kimmie suggested.

"H'm, no . . ." Michael mused, trying to find the right adjective.

"Succulent!" suggested D.P.

Michael laughed at this. A quick stab of jealousy caused Kimmie to frown. He liked the mannequin girl. He liked her worldliness, her maturity. She apologised because she had the beauty not necessarily to be subjected by her apology. She knew her worth.

Kimmie suddenly wanted to cry out: "She's not worthy of a glance from you, Michael Dane" and then, as the lights were lowered for Act Two, Kimmie, unable to resist a pleasurable childish gasp when the curtain rose on the Stage set of the Toymaker's shop, suddenly discovered that Michael was searching for her hand. In a wild elation she put her hand into his, and he held it lightly, without pressure, but it made her shudder slightly, in an anticipation of future loveliness.

CHAPTER NINE

As the final curtain dropped at the end of *Coppélia*, there was vociferous applause in which none joined more enthusiastically than Kimmie: even the phlegmatic Dead Pan remarked that it was "terrific".

Kimmie turned to Michael as they moved slowly towards the centre gangway, and asked: "Did you enjoy it? I mean were they good? I really don't know a thing about it?"

"You're flattering me, Kimmie," Michael replied (The first time he had called her by her Christian name, momentous occasion!) "I don't know much about the technique myself; but I think they were good." His eyes swept quickly across the auditorium. "It's amazing how ballet has caught on," he observed.

"Yes. We went—D.P. and I—in the war-days when the Arts had that bob ballet in the lunch hour. It seemed the perfect relaxation for—well,—'war strain', I suppose you'd call it—it sounds a bit silly now," Kimmie said.

"A lot of Londoners tried it, for the first time, I imagine, for the same reason," Michael replied, "and found they liked it. Now it's never been so popular here. The thing that interests me as a producer is the kind of audience they get."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it's no longer the *Avant Garde*, as it were, I mean, not just the Arty-Crafty crowd—its, its more *representative*," Michael explained.

"Yes, the people you ticked off were hardly Arty-Crafty," D.P. said. Michael laughed.

"Not exactly!"

They stood outside the theatre and conferred.

"Where shall we go?" Michael asked them. "I'm sure you could eat more supper."

"Heavens, I couldn't eat a thing!" Kimmie replied.

"Oh, come now. I've never known anyone refuse the Savoy Grill's haddock—"

"Some coffee would be nice," D.P. suggested.

"Well, their coffee takes some beating."

Although Kimmie thought that it would be fun to have coffee at the Savoy Grill and see the celebrities, yet she felt it rather unfair on Michael to let him take them there just for coffee.

"There's a Quality Inn near here, what about there?" she suggested.

But, when they had strolled there, pushing their way through garrulous groups spewed out from other theatres in the neighbourhood and Dead Pan grumbly said: "People's manners have been good only once in ten years, and that was on VE Day!" they found that the Inn was crowded.

"It'll have to be the Grill, after all," Michael said, "unless, if you *really* only want coffee and a sandwich, we try the *Painted Bell* just round the corner from here, what about that?"

"Don't know it, but it's O.K. by me," D.P. replied.

"Oh, yes!" Kimmie exclaimed. "It's rather nice!"

"Sometimes, when I was in the R.A.F. and had had too many beery nights," Michael told them, "some of the boys and I used to go there for a coffee and sandwich. I heard my first bomb come down, when I was there. Funny, because we had been dropping them ourselves, as fighter-bombers, but had never been on the receiving end, it was interesting to hear it come down."

"'Interesting' is the sort of word D.P. would use!" Kimmie observed.

"Well, the coffee sales certainly went up at the *Painted Bell* that night," Michael confessed. "Nothing like a cuppa cawfee to steady the old nerves!"

The *Painted Bell* was fairly full but they were able to find an unoccupied table at the back of the room. It was the sort of café which had begun to spring up about the beginning of the war, the basic idea, the modern fittings and the sandwich bar, came from the States, the rather genteel atmosphere was essentially British, the *Painted Bell*

clientele differed greatly from that of the Milk Bar as, indeed, it also differed from the afternoon and matinée trade which crowded into the rather sad establishments run by ladies in reduced circumstances, where the atmosphere gave one the feeling that even the buns were just a little constipated.

D.P. who had not been there before, looked around at the pale pink American cloth curtains, the tubular chairs and table, the imitation-onyx sandwich bar, the neon type of semi-concealed lighting and grunted a "All very nice!"

The coffee was served there in large white mugs with pink handles and pink saucers. D.P. wanted to whisper to Kimmie that the paper in the loo was probably a pleasant shade of pastel pink, too. The young ladies who served there wore big black bows on their heads and pink aprons with a white emblem of a bell embroidered on the pockets.

"If I fail at Banderton's, I can always come here and try for a job! The girls look very clean and the costumes are not as frightful as most!" Dead Pan observed. Kimmie, who had taken her eyes off Michael for a brief moment to look at the waitresses, suddenly exclaimed:

"Well, I'm badgered!"

At the cashier's desk by the door, two middle-aged people, rather tweedy, fresh-complexioned and diffident, stood smiling at the company, in search of a table.

"No need to tell me!" Michael said, as he noted the same broad forehead, the big blue eyes, the creamy skin of the rather buxom lady. Kimmie in forty years' time?

"Your people!"

"Yes. Luff and Diddy!" Kimmie replied and waved. D.P. frowned. The best laid schemes . . . she had arranged to leave Michael and Kimmie after the coffee and catch an Earl's Court tube from the Circus, so that Michael could see Kimmie home alone. What would this new development mean? That she would have to stay the night with Kimmie after all?

"Well, I'm dashed!" exclaimed Kimmie's father, observing the waving figure in the corner. "It's the heir to the Blaxland overdraft!"

"Kimmie! But how splendid!" Diddy called out.

They crossed the café, their faces shining with pleasure, rather out-of-place among the more dressy after-theatre crowd, who turned to watch their progress.

"This is nice!" said Kimmie. "Mummy, Daddy, this is Michael Dane—Michael—er—Mr. Dane—my mother and father—and I always call them Luff and Diddy, like their friends."

"How-do-you-dos" were exchanged. Mrs. Blaxland turned and said a few words to D.P.

"Do sit down, I'll get another chair," Michael turned to do so, but one of the waitresses had already found a free one and moved it up to their table.

"Thank you. Two more mugs of coffee, please and—" Michael turned to the Blaxlands, "anything to eat?"

"No. We just came in for a coffee, thank you. We're off to the wilds of Elstree."

"What on earth are you two darlings doing up here—?"

"'At this time of night', you sound as if you're going to say," Luff genially added for Kimmie. "But don't worry, Kim, your respected parents do not turn into pumpkins at midnight!"

"The truth is," Mrs. Blaxland explained: "We've been to the Ballet—"

"And, apart from an unseemly noise at the beginning of Act One from a gang of roughs in the front of the house, we—"

But Luff Blaxland got no further.

"Oh Luff, darling, that's perfect, you see that was us!"

"What?"

"We were the cause of the upheaval."

"You were?"

"Well, not exactly us, Mr. Blaxland," D.P. explained, "Mr. Dane was the cause of stopping them."

"Well I'm jiggered!" Luff exclaimed.

"How extraordinary that we should be at the same show and then meet afterwards," Diddy Blaxland beamingly added.

"Lucky I was behaving myself!" Kimmie suggested.

"Yes, it's certainly well done if you *arranged* it for us! Mr. Dane and Mary. Splendid chaperonage!"

"Mary?" Michael echoed.

"Oh dear!" Dead Pan pretended to groan.

"I always thought that your initials stood for Daphne Pamela or Daisy Primrose—don't tell me you're just a charming 'Mary'?"

"It's a long story and Kimmie is *not* going to tell it to you," D.P. replied, with a meaning glance at her friend.

"Do your folk call you D.P.—I mean, were you christened D.P.?" Michael persisted. Kimmie was enjoying it all hugely.

"You beast!" D.P. said to her, and turning to Diddy Blaxland added: "What a revolting daughter you have Mrs. Blaxland!"

"I know! I know! Takes after her daddy!"

"I say!" Luff protested.

"You haven't answered my question!" Michael reminded D.P.

"Mr. Dane I was not christened D.P. anything, my name is Mary Hockey-Marking. At home, and with the Blaxlands, and so on, I am called by my Christian name. By some extremely stupid gag or whimsy I am nick-named D.P."

"Which is short for?" Kimmie added.

"Oh stow it, Kimmie, you meanie!"

"It seems to me," Michael said, turning to Kimmie, "this will have to go on the Agenda with Casardi and Co."

"Yes, I think it will!" Kimmie agreed.

"Promise you won't tell, please, Kimmie!" D.P. pleaded.

"I don't know why you should worry. You've always *professed* it

never bothered you before," Kimmie replied, winking across the table at Michael.

"Well, this is sort of—Don't you see, if Mr. Dane *agrees* with my nickname, it'll ruin my chances of a theatrical career?" Dead Pan explained ruefully.

"That's rich! Oh nicely, nicely!" said Kimmie. "I certainly respect that!"

"Oh, are you at Bandertons?" Diddy asked Michael.

"Alas, Madame! I do have the misfortune to tutor your daughter and her friend!" Michael admitted.

"I think you're both jolly rude, keeping Mr. Dane in suspense like this, not to mention Diddy and your dear old Dad!" Luff told Kimmie. "What is the D.P. short for?"

"Aren't you 'in' on the deadly secret, Mr. Blaxland?" Michael enquired.

"No, sir. This sad-faced little friend of my daughter's is Mary to me, no chummy stuff with Papa Blaxland, I'm afraid," Luff kidded.

Michael was warming to these good-natured, cheery parents of Kimmie's, with their out-of-town clothes and their air of satisfied casualness. He was thinking that he would like to know more about them when Mrs. Blaxland, as if sensing his thoughts and, after due deliberation in her mind as to whether Mr. Dane was Kimmie's friend or D.P. Mary Hockey-Marking's, invited:

"I hope you'll come down and spend the week-end with us, Mr. Dane, when Mary's staying, too. We live at Elstree."

"Yes. You must do that," Luff agreed. "Mary can share Kimmie's room, and there's the world's smallest room for the welcome guest. The bungalow is called the Gables—no relation of Clark's—and we've nicknamed the place Blaxland's Folly."

"Or, less politely, Belly Acres!" Kimmie told Michael.

"Kimmie!" reproved Diddy.

"Well, he's bound to know sooner or later," Kimmie excused herself. Michael, who laughed uproariously, said:

"It sounds enchanting."

"There's precious little enchantment about it," Luff Blaxland told him and added, wryly: "In fact, there's precious little of it, at all!"

"We like it, though," the kindly Diddy Blaxland said, with an almost fierce assertiveness, she put her hand on her husband's which rested on the table, her blue eyes misting slightly.

Michael, suddenly embarrassed by their happiness in one another, was quite touched by their genuineness. In a world of sham or make-believe, quickly-made and dissolved friendships and marriages, it was rather a splendid thing: companionship, in the broadest sense, was a quality of tremendous value. He turned to Kimmie and saw the same blue eyes and wide forehead of the mother reflected there. Luff squeezed her hand and patted it, and Michael, turning back to them, noticed that Luff's fingers were long, and artistic and badly cared for; as if he had stained the floor before coming out, and hadn't

really the time or the inclination to attend to his nails. It wasn't that he was not clean, Luff positively glowed with cleanliness, but he was obviously the sort of enthusiastic person who left those little personal things to be attended to, when he had less on his mind, and then forgot them. Michael could visualise him forgetting to brush his hair or do up his flies; he had, obviously, a mind which was always occupied with ideas, presumably something rather artistic. He was very keen to ask Kimmie and would take the first opportunity he could of doing so.

With a start, Michael found Kimmie looking at him fixedly, as if awaiting his answer.

"You will, won't you?" she asked. The invitation to Elstree.

"Yes. Thank you, so much. Rather! I'd love to!" Michael replied.

Kimmie seemed very relieved and D.P. said "But don't expect me to walk with you down Elstree's leafy lanes. I am not the bucolic type!"

"Long words, indeed!" said Luff.

"No, you're not, that's probably why you're called D.P.!" Kimmie said cheerfully, baiting Dead Pan once more.

"You little brute!"

"Now you've got me intrigued again," Michael confessed.

"Well," said Luff, making a move, "You gay boulevardiers may be able to sit around half the night, but your poor old parents must catch their train for the wide open spaces."

D.P. was very relieved that they were making the first move. She had not told Kimmie that she had arranged to go home and was, thus, leaving Kimmie her flat to herself. A girl simply had to make the most of her opportunities, D.P. reasoned; but it was as well for the Blaxlands to assume that D.P. was staying the night with Kimmie, and that, therefore, Michael Dane would bid them *both* "good night" at the corner of Jermyn Street and Armynter Court,

"Don't forget to arrange with the girls about that week-end," Luff reminded Michael.

"Thank you, sir, I won't!" Michael assured him. Luff made a face as if he had taken a bite out of a tart apple.

"I appreciate your manners, Mr. Dane, in addressing me as 'sir' but, lawks, I dislike the truth behind 'em! Do I look that old?"

"No, sir!" Michael replied quickly, and they all laughed. 'What nice parents I've got!' Kimmie thought, with pleasurable pride. Whilst Luff shook hands with Michael and patted D.P. on the shoulder, Kimmie kissed her mother.

"See you Saturday, I expect, darling," Kimmie said.

"Yes, dear," Diddy replied, Kimmie very rarely failed to go home for the week-end, but she liked to give the impression that she might not be down, it gave her a spirit of independence.

"Good-byes" were exchanged and the senior Blaxlands moved off.

"More coffee or are you tired?" Michael asked them.

"I'd love some more," Kimmie told him.

D.P. waited a few moments for the Blaxlands to "get clear and then,"

as the waitress came up to take Michael's new order, she refused, excusing herself by saying she was very tired, but that it was no trouble to get an Underground train home from the Circus. Before Michael had a chance to protest, D.P. pecked Kimmie's forehead and with a quick:

"Thank you so much for a lovely evening, it was terrific!" to Michael she was away.

"Now, there's a strange girl—" Michael began.

"She's grand. A wonderful friend. I'm fearfully fond of her."

"Oh, I like her. I like her tremendously, but she's much more shrewd than one at first anticipates."

"Yes. There's a Mona Lisa-like quality about our D.P."

"Do tell me what D.P. stands for!"

"No. I can't now that she's given me a fairly good reason for not spilling the beans."

"I'll have to tackle Harry Barlow or Eustace Harradine."

"I'll have to swear them to secrecy, first!"

"Well, I'll try Joan Davidson!" Michael ventured. As he thought, Kimmie instantly bridled.

"She's bound to tell you. *Her* best part is undoubtedly *Lady Sneerwell in School for Scandal!*"

"Do I detect a slightly feline atmosphere descending into the *Painted Bell*?"

"Sorry; was I being catty?"

"Yes."

"Oh, lord! am I in your bad books?" Kimmie asked, looking so rueful that Michael, after looking gravely at her, solemnly winked and righted matters.

"I think your parents are charming."

"Slightly mad, of course, but completely divine," Kimmie said.

"Has your father retired?"

"Goodness, no! He works jolly hard—well," Kimmie added, "that is, when Mummy makes him."

"What does he do?"

"Draws serials for the comics and designs Christmas cards."

"What?"

"Don't look so surprised, someone has to do it!"

"Yes, I suppose so! I hadn't thought of that!" Michael confessed. He thought about it for a moment, then said: "What a delightful profession, I suppose that's why he's so boyish?"

"They're really sweet, I adore them," Kimmie said, adolescently. "They never have a bean. They scraped and cadged to get me to the Banderton. I hope I'm not going to let them down."

"Are you very keen about the Theatre, Kimmie?"

"Madly!"

Michael nodded. "I expect you'll be all right," he said. She did not quite know what he meant and, if it was an assurance, it was not as stupendous or definite as she had hoped it would be. As a confirmation or a compliment it was sadly lacking. Disappointedly she said:

"You aren't very sure. I am relying on you!"

"No one can be sure. I'll put my money on you, if that will help." He paused, then asked: "Why were you called Kimmie?"

"I was christened Kim because, before I arrived, Luff, Daddy, was quite convinced that I was going to be a boy. Not that he *minded* a girl, particularly, he said, after all, girls *have* been known to go into business, and make good and not be a bore or drudge to a family. Anyway, Diddy was happy because it meant that Daddy would have to be tolerant, and that was a good thing—"

"I got the impression that your father was a pretty tolerant cove—"

"Well I *don't* really know," Kimmie confessed. "You see, Luff's so awfully young in himself and, as you said, 'boyish'. Well, it must have been a blow when he found me there instead of a manly little chap—it couldn't have been much fun for him, I imagine, shouting out encouragement to his daughter at lacrosse when he wanted a son captaining the Rugger Fifteen."

"I've always thought lacrosse a dam' sight more manly than rugby!" Michael said, eyes twinkling as he 'chivvied' her.

"You don't seem to understand what I mean. You seem to be siding with *me*."

"—And not your father?"

"Well, consider Daddy's position, it was bad luck—"

"You're pretty fond of them, aren't you, Kim?"

Kimmie nodded simply. Then she looked up at him, her blue eyes were very friendly:

"You're asking a lot of questions tonight," she observed.

"Yes, but this is about the first answer, I've got! So you should have been a boy."

"Yes."

"I shouldn't have liked that!" Michael said with a smile.

"Horrors! No more would I!" Kimmie added.

"Then, since your parents are satisfied with what they got and you're happy about it and I am, I think the subject can be considered closed?"

"Definitely."

"And now for the Blaxland London ménage."

They finished their coffees and Michael paid the bill, the cashier, with a Hollywood hair-do and a dazzling smile, murmured: "Good night, Mr. Dane" as they went out of the café.

"She *thinks* I might give her a film test," Michael explained.

"Would she be any good?" Kimmie asked him.

"Oh, films!" he replied contemptuously. "Who can tell? I know several people who couldn't give a performance on the stage if they tried who have become international stars on the films."

"Oh, but there are some marvellous actors and actresses on the films, for instance—"

"I know. I know," Michael interrupted her, almost impatiently. "I'm afraid I'm old-fashioned," he said. It made her laugh.

"No, I am. Well, about the Theatre, then," he added.

"I didn't know you disliked the Cinema."

"I didn't say that."

"No, you didn't have to!"

"Are you disappointed? I mean, you could always switch to old man Banderton's Film Section. A lot of students take both courses, though, since the technique's quite different, I abhor the idea!"

"No. I'm not really disappointed," Kimmie replied. Somehow she had visualised going to films with Michael, sometimes. She loved the cinema and she had seen them, in the years to come, taking "Junior" to the children's matinées.

"I like going!" Michael said, smiling at her, as they walked along Shaftesbury Avenue to the Circus.

Had he read her mind? Not all of it, not the idea of "Junior"—that might frighten him off; after all, here they were, the first time they had been alone together and she was already—had been before they had been out together—planning on children and she didn't even know if he *liked* children, if he *wanted* children. Give the man time to propose!

Kimmie checked herself from asking him if he liked children, in her mind she had seen a way to do so, quite naturally, from 'films' to 'films for children' to 'children'—but she thought that she was going too far. Nary a word, Kimmie . . . yet!

The after-theatre crowds had thinned out in Piccadilly Circus, but the neon advertisements flashed and splashed Eros with a startling array of colours; the late 'buses, sped in their scarlet splendour around him, some to Cambridge Circus, others to the Strand, some up Regent Street, others along Piccadilly, friendly creatures, like ships, she thought.

"Don't you love London?" Kimmie asked him.

"Yes," he replied, fervently. "In a little while, the town will be quiet except for the street cleaners in their South African hats, hosing the face of London. That's the time I like best. Though, in the black-out days, when there was a full moon, and no street lamps on to detract, there was a wondrous beauty about it."

"Not so good, though, for Londoners, those full moon nights!" Kimmie reminded him.

"No. But exciting days." Michael added.

"Yes."

They walked on in silence then, as they crossed to Jermyn Street, Michael took her arm and continued to hold it as they walked. The midnight air was cool and fragrant, as if it had been scooped up from St. James's Park and wafted on a zephyr to them as they made for Armynter Court.

How happy she was! She would like to walk with him all the way to the country and they would breakfast together at some quaint old farm house. The morning sun would stream through the windows—

"Pensive type!" Michael interrupted her thoughts.

"It's all been so nice," she said.

"Yes. I have enjoyed it. I'm glad I've met your parents—"

"Luff and Diddy. Everyone calls them that," she corrected him.
 "All the more reason for my calling them Mr. and Mrs. Blaxland!"
 "Individuality retained at all times!" she said.

"That doesn't sound like Kimmie Blaxland," he told her.

"No. To be honest, it's one of Charles Grafton's sayings."

"It would be," he replied. She could not be sure if he approved.

"What about Charles; will he 'make the grade'?" Kimmie asked.

"Look here, young woman, you mustn't ask me those sort of questions, it's unethical!" Michael replied in humorous explosive mood.

"I don't care about ethics!" Kimmie tossed her head. He remonstrated.

"Oh come, now!"

The black two-piece, with the white frilly blouse, accentuated her blonde beauty. She was a lovely radiant young creature. What he could not tell her was that he did not *mind* if she became a great actress or not. Not that he did not want her ambition satisfied but he had a complex about his private life. One day, perhaps, he would tell her. Perhaps: he did not know. He repeated:

"Don't care about ethics?"

"No!" Was it to prove her defiance of the conventions? Was she trying to tell him that she was not necessarily the innocent sweet thing with the nice prosaic parents?

"Oh!" he finally said, softly.

He felt her holding his arm more firmly, almost tightly, but he pretended not to have noticed it. She looked up at him, intensely.

"Kim!"

"Yes—Michael?"

Saying his name caused a sudden tiny shudder within her, ecstatic . . .

"You're a darling."

"Yes?"

"I think so."

They paused at the Archway which led into Armynter Court. The courtyard was deserted but the solitary lamp in the centre of it was alight. They turned and faced one another and were silent. There was one clear-cut thought predominating in Kimmie's mind as, serenely, and with tranquillity which belied the racing heart, she looked up at him.

In Michael's mind a hundred different thoughts scuttled, tempestuously, twisted, uncertain; light and shade, light and shade.

"It's too late to see Casardis'," he said.

"That's his shop!" she pointed off in the direction of it, without taking her eyes off him. He nodded without looking at it.

"I expect Mr. Casardi—"

"—And all the Casardi family—" she added.

"And all the Casardi family are tucked up in bed and snoring gently."

"Snoring loudly, I expect," she corrected him and added: "And with all the windows closed."

"On such a night?"

"On such a night."

"People haven't a clue sometimes," he said, and wondered why her lips parted in amusement.

"Now what?"

"Sometimes Squadron Leader Michael Dane seeps through!" she explained. He considered this.

"Oh! 'Haven't a clue', you mean?"

"Yes."

"It would be nice to walk and walk," he said. Kimmie nodded.

"And then to lie on a haystack," she added. Michael looked at her, elevating his right eyebrow.

"That's very provocative!" she said.

"So would the haystack be!" he replied. She nodded, quite simply, as if she realised this, as if, perhaps it was ordained that he should make love to her on the top of a haystack, with all the magical loveliness of the night encompassing them.

"It's time young Blaxlands were in bed," he said. She tried to will him to say he would like to see her flat.

"Which is your place?" he asked.

"Opposite the pub. at the end."

He nodded.

Suddenly there was no need for him to escort her across the yard or to go up with her to the flat. Not now. Not at that moment because, in a trice, both of them were aware that he would. Some other time, it would be. He would get to know Armynter Court. He would be there. And, strangely, Kimmie did not feel disappointed. Nor, when he suddenly kissed her chastely on the brow, was she disappointed. She moved quickly across the Court as if wasted there on the music of *Coppélia*.

Michael stood, silhouetted by the Archway, watching her go. Another watched her and turned resentfully hostile eyes back on to Michael.

"So she *has* a boy friend, your sweet young thing, has she?" Rory Malone said to himself, as he looked down from his window. He kissed her, too. He kissed Kimmie. *On the forehead, you nasty-minded rogue you. It was the kiss an uncle would give his niece: it was as innocent a peck as ever I've seen, Rory boyo; it was innocent. Yes, but . . . That's it! Torment yourself, Rory! Shall I help you? Shall I help you enjoy the misery of it? All right! It might be the first kiss of a romance about to blossom! There you are! Now sit up half the night and have a nice lovely worry!*

Rory heard her light tread on the stairs and her key in her door lock.

He listened to her move across her flat and go to the window . . . In his mind he could clearly picture her blowing a kiss to the man on the corner.

Well, he's not visited her. He's not come up to her flat, has he? No.

No, that's true! But . . . *Now what?* Perhaps she has been to his place . . . ! Rory clenched his hands and in a sudden anguish beat them on the bed.

CHAPTER TEN

WHEN Kimmie met D.P. at Banderton's the next morning, the latter was so keen to hear about what happened after she had left Kimmie and Michael, that she insisted on Kimmie going "to powder" after prayers, even if it meant their being late for Terence Rattigan's guest-lecture on Modern Comedy. Kimmie, radiantly happy, described in detail the walk home, the pause by the archway and the kiss on the forehead.

"On the forehead!" echoed Dead Pan, but with a horror that could not have been more emphasised if Kimmie had had some virulent disease.

"Now, D.P.—" Kimmie began to remonstrate but D.P. impatiently enquired:

"Well, what *then*? Did you show him the flat?"

"No, not exactly . . ." Kimmie faltered.

"Not exactly?"

"Well, not at all."

"Why, what happened?"

"It's—it's difficult to explain, D.P. But it's not all that important . . ." Kimmie stumbled over the words. "I mean . . . we meant . . . it was obvious . . ."

"Don't you think he was keen, after all? A kiss on the forehead, that's terribly paternal," D.P. mused and added: "Yet I could have sworn he was keen."

"That's just it. There was no hurry about seeing the flat. I mean, he will . . . it's as if . . . oh, I can't exactly describe it but it's *all right!*"

"What are you burbling about? Did you want Michael Dane to take you home?"

"Of course!"

"And did you want him to—?"

"That's what I mean, D.P. it isn't just that I want to have an *affaire* with him. It was a lovely evening and suddenly, just as I was trying to *will* myself to get him to come in, I found that it didn't really matter—"

"Didn't matter, but—?"

"Not *then*. Things would work out; I mean, all in good time. I was happy the way it was. Much more than that. Oh, D.P. it was marvellous—just he and I."

"Heavens!" D.P. exclaimed. "You're really in love with him!"

"But, of course, I always have been."

"No, you had a crush or a Thing about him—but this is the genuine article! Well, I'm jiggered!"

"Come on, D.P. we'll be late for the Rattigan lecture. I don't want to miss any of it and if we're late we'll be locked out."

"So you've really fallen!" D.P. said softly. She searched her friend's face and smiled. "Yes. I can see it in your eyes. Oh, Kim! What fun!"

Suddenly, girlishly and completely out-of-her-usual precise, impervious manner, D.P. impulsively kissed Kimmie, and then, just as suddenly, she said:

"Come on. We must go!"

And the two girls sped down the corridor and tapped on the glass panel of the door which was now bolted. It was unfortunate for them that Joan Davidson was door usher, she turned and looked at them for what seemed fully a minute and then she turned away. On the dais, Terence Rattigan could be seen adjusting his notes.

D.P. tapped on the glass again and this time Joan Davidson did not even turn round.

"That little witch!" D.P. murmured. "It looks as if we'll have to spend this lecture drinking coffee at the *Express Dairy*."

"No, we won't!" Kimmie exclaimed. She banged fiercely on the door and now Terence Rattigan looked up and signalled to the crest-fallen Joan Davidson to let the two late-comers into the lecture room.

They apologised and thanked him and, with disdainful glances at Joan Davidson, wriggled into overcrowded benches in the front row. D.P. saw the three boys at the back of the room and waved to them with studied nonchalance.

After the lecture, which was received with great approbation, the Frightful Five managed to team up for the next class. The boys made no reference to the previous evening and, when lunch time came, automatically, since they were the last to get out of Miss Kinsman's class (for they always sat at the back where Harry Barlow sometimes read and Eustace Harradine occasionally dropped off to sleep), they went to Uncle Joe's for lunch.

"Come in, my darlings!" he called out, boisterously. "Look at my beauties. Come in, my dears!"

In a way it was fortunate that there was no sign of Michael Dane. In fact, Kimmie did not see him until, the following day, with the sun streaming into the classroom, and with thoughts of the week-end (and whether it would be considered too soon to invite Michael down to Elstree), Mr. Bingo Oliphant was interrupted in his treatise on *The Theatre in the days of Will Shakespeare* by the arrival of a messenger with word that Miss Blaxland was wanted in the Staff Common Room.

The usual Banderton jokes were thrown lightly at Kimmie as she left the room.

"Gielgud wants her for the new Haymarket show!"

"Don't worry, Kimmie, it's to announce your parents' wedding!"

"Obviously she's been left twenty thousand and is going to buy the place!"

"Why don't you give the man his ten-and-six—so he can feed the little beggar?"

Mr. Oliphant testily called for "silence!"

Once she was in the corridor Kimmie poked her tongue out at the class, making a grimace through the glass, and went slowly to the Staff Common Room, idly wondering what was in store for her. She took her time getting there, for she was finding Bingo's lecture rather tedious. When she reached the Staff Common Room, she tapped on the door and Michael Dane's voice answered:

"Come in!"

Michael was alone in the room with his hat in his hand.

"Hallo!" he observed cheerfully.

"Did you want me?"

"Yes. No time to lose. Got to hurry," he said to her in staccato fashion.

"What's happened?"

"Can't explain now! Tell you outside! Meet you down at the corner of Tavistock and Burleigh!"

"But I'm in the middle of a class, Michael—"

"Yes, Bingo's. This is far more important! I'll join you in a minute!" Michael said.

Kimmie hurried out into the sunlight. Michael kept her waiting only a few moments before he joined her. They positively raced into the Strand, along to Waterloo Bridge and down the steps to the Embankment.

"What on earth is happening?" Kimmie asked him. "Will you please explain!"

"Of course. The thing is, I haven't a thing to do till my four-thirty class."

Kimmie stopped.

"But I have, Michael. What *is* this?"

"It's the most unethical thing I've ever done in my whole career," Michael confessed with a grin. "But, suddenly, it became very important to me."

"What, Michael? *What?*"

"Don't stop. We want to get a tram along to Big Ben."

"Michael—!"

"Well, I had a wild desire to go downstream on one of those river steamers," Michael explained. "Furthermore, I had a wild desire to go with *you!*"

"But Michael Dane—"

"Will you stop saying 'But Michael' for one minute!" he requested.

"But Michael—"

"Quiet! Seeing that the chances of two super summer days aren't remotely possible in an English summer and knowing that dear old Bingo would be boring you stiff, it occurred to me that if we were both to sneak out and get to Big Ben, these boats leave every ten minutes or so and we could cruise down to Tower Bridge and back. The whole thing only takes forty-five minutes and, as you have a tea break after Bingo's lecture, you'll be back in time for—"

"Do you mean to tell me that you've got me out here on false pretences—and that you sent a messenger—?" Words failed Kimmie, she looked with incredulity at Michael's amused face. They had continued walking and had boarded a tram which was taking them along the Embankment towards Westminster.

"I was clever about the messenger. I merely took the receiver off the telephone in the Staff Room, with my finger on the hook, of course, and when the messenger arrived, I was engrossed in an imaginary conversation with your Aunt Agatha."

"But I—"

"No, but if anyone asks about her, don't say you haven't, will you?" Michael suddenly stopped being breezy. "Am I forgiven?" he asked her, contritely.

"Do you realise we might both be asked to leave Banderton's?" she asked him.

"You make it sound awful."

"But don't you realise the seriousness of it? It's—it's simply crazy, Michael!"

"Yes." He admitted it, then he saw that Kimmie's eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"And I think it's the divinest thing that ever happened at Banderton's!" she confessed.

The tram stopped with a lurch at Westminster Steps and they got off and hurried to the quay. A pleasure steamer, with a fairly full complement, was almost ready to slip. With much laughter, they were able to secure seats in the bows. The sun, as if to share their mood, sparkled joyously on the rippling water. With a warning toot, the ship moved away downstream.

"It's time some of us Londoners knew something about our fair city. When you think that in olden days, the Thames—"

But he got no further for Kimmie, laying a restraining hand on his arm, said:

"I've just heard from Mr. Oliphant how the audiences crossed to Will Shakespeare's theatre, so if you don't mind, we'll skip the running commentary."

But they did not entirely skip it, for a freckled-faced youth in a dirty once-white jumper and a naval petty-officer's cap (perhaps the property of his father) on which was inscribed the word "Guide," carrying a large megaphone, paced the deck, occasionally imparting odd patches of knowledge which were commercial rather than historic. "Reg" (for such they instantly dubbed him), was far more impressed with Shell-Mex House and the Savoy Hotel than he was with Cleopatra's Needle or Wapping Steps. "Reg" was a serious "guide", and was determined that the passengers should have no reason for disapproval over his voice. He spoke as if he had aspirates round his teeth. The word 'building' took on a long gooey flavour and came out of his mouth as "buelding", with plenty of time on the "bueld" and a great deal of "ding". Kimmie and Michael, with serious faces when he passed, were able to "let up"

when he megaphoned to the other passengers in the stern. "Reg is quite a character!" Kimmie observed.

"There you are; if you hadn't played truant, you would never have met him!" Michael told her.

"The whole idea was a fine one, Michael—but a little surprising, I mean, the idea of you—"

"Behaving in a manner that is unorthodox, to say the least of it? Too true, but, Kimmie, I've found that very often in life my happiest moments have been those in which I have suddenly done something quickly and without contemplation of the consequences," Michael told her.

"Even when they involved someone else?" Kimmie ventured. Michael looked glum.

"That was stupid of me, I admit," he admitted, then asked: "But you are glad you came?"

"What do you think?"

"Yes."

"Of course 'yes', and if Papa Banderton expels me from his academy you will have to put me into one of your West End plays, I'll settle for nothing less than that."

"I was wondering how your parents would react if you left Banderton's?"

"The conversation's taking a gloomy turn. Let's concentrate on the River!"

The diminutive freckled-faced guide was soon back in the bows to announce:

"Now, on your left, ladies'n'gennelmen, the Tower of London, that oblong bueld-ding over there and in front of yew, Tower Bridge."

"So now you know," Michael whispered. Kimmie nodded.

"I particularly like 'that oblong building', " she replied.

"And Reg's hat. His hat is especially nice, don't you think? I mean, it's quite clear from the lettering that he's not the stoker or just one of the deck hands," Michael said, tongue in cheek, adding:

"He couldn't have had the lettering any bigger, could he?"

"Well, you might suggest that there is room on his jersey for it, too."

"I will, when he comes round for his money."

"You paid at the Pier Head."

"Yes, but young ginger isn't wearing out his larynx just for the fun of hearing his own voice. You wait till we get nearer Westminster Steps!"

Sure enough, as the pleasure steamer approached Westminster Bridge and circled to come alongside the quay, port-side to, young Reg moved among the passengers with an old hospital money box which had the label stripped off it. A large "Thank you" was pasted along the front of the box and young Reg, determined that there should be no mistaking his reason for carrying the box was saying loudly:

"If you'd like to! If you'd like to!"

When he reached Michael, Michael slipped half-a-crown into the box and young Reg, who was presumably counting the pennies as they dropped, uttered an astonished:

"Blimey!"

He recovered sufficiently to add:

"Thank you, sir!"

"I'm glad you did that," Kimmie said quietly.

Michael had made the gesture without any desire to impress, in fact, he was surprised that she had observed him.

"Sorry. I happened to notice and sorry I mentioned it," Kimmie continued, "but I liked it, all the same."

"He was worth it. He gave us a lot of enjoyment, didn't he?"

"Yes," Kimmie agreed. "But you were outrageously generous."

"Class distinction!" Michael assured her.

"You did it because you knew he'd be pleased, didn't you?"

"What *is* this, an inquisition?" Michael grinned. "Now, this is where we really step on it. As soon as the ship's alongside, up the steps as fast as you can and board the first tram going in the direction of the City," he ordered. "I'll be following you—or half a head in front!" he added.

"I'm warning you I was Girls Champion of the Hertford—" Kimmie began.

"Never mind that, get going!"

They raced up the steps with Kimmie leading until, halfway up them, Michael took the lead with a:

"Just to prove there's life in the old dog yet!"

"If Papa Banderton could see us now!" Kimmie panted.

Fortunately, when they reached the tram stop, a taxi cruised past, waiting for a fare. They engaged it and jumped in.

"That's a bit of luck. You'll even have time for a cup of tea."

"That's splendid! Nice staff work!" Kimmie congratulated him.

"I'll get him to drop me off by the Gaiety, I'll stooge up in my own time," Michael told her.

"And if I'm standing outside Banderton's with my head held low and my hands crossed in front of me, you'll know I've been cast out," Kimmie told him. Then, growing serious, she took his hands impulsively and looked at him steadily.

"It *has* been fun, Michael. The sort of thing I've dreamed about."

"With me?" he asked her, surprised at her sudden change of mood.

She nodded, closing her eyes for a brief moment. The mascara-ed lashes, darkly fluttered like butterflies coming to rest on her fresh-complexioned cheeks. He thought, they are long and wondrous fair really, she doesn't need that stuff on them, or the lipstick. The lipstick was inexpertly placed and too thick. She opened her eyes and asked:

"What are you thinking, Michael?"

The age-old question, but, before he could answer, (and, in truth, he was not sure how he should answer, he had found comradeship and suddenly was faced with something more, and he was not yet clear in

his mind whether it was a better substitute), the taxi gave a violent lurch to avoid a whistling errand-boy on a bike, who had swerved out from behind a 'bus, and Michael and Kimmie were thrown together. He took her in his arms and she closed her eyes again, her lips parted slightly.

"I was thinking that if you hadn't got all that confounded stuff on your lips—" he began. Kimmie opened her eyes in astonishment. His tone was half humour, half irritation.

"Taxis aren't exactly . . ." Kimmie began. She wondered if he was beginning to have regrets, doubts, vague shadowy frightening things.

"Sorry, Kim."

"About—about what, Michael? It's been fun."

"The end of the adventure, I mean! This is where I get out," he said. He tapped on the taxi's communication window to indicate to the driver to stop. As he got out she was prompted to say:

"I don't have that stuff on my lips all the time, Michael."

He gave her a quick penetrating glance.

"No," he said. "No, indeed!" It could have meant anything. Suddenly, after a halcyon afternoon, there was a let-down. The sun, as if in complete sympathy, disappeared behind a cloud. Light and shade. Laughter and tears. What had he wanted out of it? Why had his mood suddenly changed? It had all been so perfect . . . He waved cheerily but now it was non-committal . . . The taxi rattled on as far as the corner of Broad Court where Kimmie paid him off.

The tea break was still in progress at the Banderton as she casually strolled into the large recreation hall. Among the first party she met, sipping cups of tea by the urn, was a bespeckled girl with a straight bob and a lop-sided grin called Enid. Joan Davidson was with her.

"Sorry about your aunt," Enid sympathised, between the tea sips. For a moment Kimmie was puzzled, then she remembered Michael's carefully established telephone ruse. So it had got round as he suspected it would. Well, she looked puzzled and lugubrious enough to have received bad news.

She was not able to enjoy the pleasure of having slipped a very fast one over Joan Davidson.

"It was nothing really. A false alarm."

"I wish I could get my aunt to ring me up in Bingo's hour," Joan Davidson said. Kimmie could not be sure if Joan suspected. Before she had replied Dead Pan joined them.

"Hallo, Kimmie, I've saved you a piece of ginger bread," D.P. said, handing it to her and giving Joan Davidson a venomous look.

"Well, don't look at me like that!" Joan Davidson said.

"You had three pieces!" D.P. replied, accusingly.

"And if I hadn't, you would have done," Joan Davidson replied, with a toss of her head. "Come on, Enid, I find it's impossible to hold any sort of conversation with Hockey-Marking or Blaxland for more than a minute. Good afternoon, ladies!"

Joan Davidson, head held high, followed by a confused Enid who smiled weakly, stalked off.

"Silly little basket!" Dead Pan exclaimed with more enthusiasm than was her wont. She turned eagerly to Kimmie.

"Have you an Aunt Agatha?"

"Of course not!"

"What was it?"

"Don't say anything or we'll both be sacked!"

"I wasn't there, how could I?" D.P. replied, amazed at this apparent injustice.

"Not you—Michael. Michael and I!" Kimmie said, dramatically.

"Why? What did—?"

The sound of the warning bell for the next class was heard stridently in the recreation hall.

"Oh, fiddle. Quick tell me in the loo!" D.P. said.

"If we're seen going to the loo together much more, they'll begin to suspect us," Kimmie said. "There's nothing to tell, really. It was rather a disappointment."

"Oh, Kimmie, don't be so mean. What happened?"

"Michael went crazy—lovely crazy. He thought up the aunt thing. We went on the river!"

"You what?"

"We went down the Thames on a steamer."

"You're mad!"

"No, honestly! It was terrific fun."

"Michael Dane took you?"

"I keep telling you!"

"Well I'm dashed! I told you he was keen."

"I—I don't know, D.P." Kimmie replied hesitantly. In her unhappiness she wanted to tell Dead Pan everything but, disappointed at her inability to 'hold' Michael, she felt foolish at having to admit defeat.

"Why, what do you mean?"

As the girls hurried out to their next class, Kimmie explained briefly, falteringly and with some confusion, for she was not clear about Michael's motives in the matter, the incident in the taxi and Michael's "The end of the adventure. This is where I get out."

D.P. looked perplexed. "You couldn't have heard him correctly," she said.

"Of course, I did. And, anyway, his manner sort of—"

"Sort of what?"

"Sort of cooled. He didn't seem to like my lipstick."

"Of course he didn't, but you could have removed it, couldn't you?"

"I hinted that I could."

"Hinted!" mimicked D.P. scornfully. "Why didn't you do it?" she paused and added in parenthesis: "Though why men choose taxis in which to become amorous, I'll never know. Uncomfortable beastly things—your teeth clash together like castanets, it makes a sudden

lurch and you're both on the floor with the wrong person on top! No, I don't like that kind of romance!"

"Dead Pan!"

"Well, I may be exaggerating."

"This is serious," Kimmie reminded her. "Well, it *was*," she added dolefully.

"Don't be so silly, Kim. You've got it all wrong. And, in any case, it was a wonderful idea and I bet it's never happened at Banderton's before. I bet Joan Davidson will be livid when she hears."

"My goodness, don't tell her. Don't tell anybody," Kimmie implored.

"Not *now*," D.P. agreed. "But don't worry. She'll know all right. I'll make it my business to tell her—some year or other!"

They reached Miss Kinsman's classroom and hurried in, D.P. said in an aside to Kimmie:

"The boys want us to go and play tennis with them. I said we would. It will sort of take the sting out of your Michael date."

"The sting's gone, I fancy," Kimmie added.

"Don't dramatise it!" D.P. replied crossly. She smiled at Miss Kinsman with the expression of a Borgia administering poison and added to Kimmie: "You *must* have misunderstood him."

Miss Kinsman's lecture on *Some Hamlets I have seen*: including John Barrymore, Robert Helpmann and Alec Clunes, went unheeded by Kimmie. Dismally she re-lived the ending of the Thames episode with Michael; mentally building-up the first part so that it was even more wondrous than reality, this heightened the disappointment of the finish in the taxi. 'Yes', she thought. 'Charles Grafton would accuse me of wallowing in my unhappiness.' But she nevertheless continued to fret over the scene. Why had she failed? What had Michael expected? Why the change of mood? She knew he was moody, most brilliant people were temperamental. What had *happened*? Lost in an insoluble reverie, Kimmie was still sitting with a frown on her face, when the classes had dismissed. Harry's cheerful "Boo!" brought her to the present.

"You must have been asleep with your eyes open!" he suggested.

"I once experimented with false eyeballs," Eustace began reflectively, "which I pasted on my eyelids. It was a rather good idea."

"You mean you then slept throughout a lecture period?" Charles Grafton, said.

"Oh, this was at school," Eustace explained. "It didn't work as well as I expected."

"Why not?"

"Well it *worked* all right," Eustace told them. "I fell into a deep sleep but the spirit gum trickled on to my lashes and I couldn't open my real eyes at all!" He concluded with a self-deprecatory grin. There was a combined burst of laughter from the others.

"You line-shooter, you made it up!"

"Eustace Harradine!"

"No, I swear it happened!"

"What did they do, give you a white stick?" Charles asked.

"That's a typical Grafton crack," said D.P. "You've got a nasty cruel streak, Charles Grafton and—"

"Oh, heavens, are you two off again?" Harry clucked at them and looked to Kimmie for support.

"Yes. Let's have a peaceful evening for a change." Kimmie pleaded.

"If I may, I'd like to close up shop," Miss Kinsman interrupted them with attempted humour.

"Oh, yes, sorry Miss Kinsman."

"Very interesting lecture, Miss Kinsman!" Charles told her.

"Hypocrite!" hissed D.P.

"I'm so glad!" their tutor replied. "Good night!"

The Frightful Five wandered out into the corridor.

"Talk about sucking-up to teacher—you'll be bringing her an apple tomorrow, I suppose," Dead Pan said accusingly to Charles.

"It was an interesting lecture," Charles maintained. "She explained the differences in their performances admirably. Olivier's *attack*, for instance—"

"Olivier's *attack*! You've got an attack—of smarm!"

"I liked the lecture and I told the old crone I did; that's not smarm!"

"Oh, you know Charles," Harry said, in conciliatory mood: "He's got a Hamlet complex."

"I've always thought I'd make a good Ophelia," Eustace said.

"Dead Pan Hockey-Marking is the perfect Ophelia!" Charles Grafton said.

"Let's call a truce!" said Harry Barlow. "I'm tired of this nattering between you two."

"I expect they'll finally marry!" suggested Eustace. There was a groan from Dead Pan and a sarcastic laugh from Charles.

"Gee, Miss Kinsman must be old if she saw John Barrymore play *Hamlet*!" observed Harry, in order to change the subject.

"Not at all," Charles replied. "He was playing it here about '24."

"About '24," Eustace sniggered. "When Charles Grafton was just a tiny molecule or atom."

"Don't be a chump!"

"I suppose your mother took you to see him?"

"As a matter of fact, my mother was in it!" Charles sprang it on them, with dramatic surprise.

"Now who's a line-shooter!"

"Charles, you liar, you!"

"Doin! Doin!" Derisively Harry imitated a bell.

Put into a most placatory mood by this, the Frightful Five separated to collect their lawn tennis clothes which they kept in lockers at Banderton's.

"I don't think I'll play," Kimmie imparted to D.P. feeling too sad for such gaiety, but D.P. merely sniffed in reply.

When they reached Lincoln's Inn Fields, where Charles had booked a court, she did, however, partner Harry and together they defeated Dead Pan and Charles in two straight sets, chiefly because Kimmie and Harry played as a team and Charles and Dead Pan as a vitriolic cross-talk act which amused the onlookers. Eustace, for that set, acted as umpire, telling them that he felt exactly like Sir Aubrey Smith.

Kimmie played with a troubled frown spoiling the serene beauty of her young face. A free-lance photographer snapped her as she made a determined return stroke and the picture appeared in one of the dailies with the caption "Determination on the Court" whereas, of course, as D.P. observed when she was shown it, it was nothing more nor less than a "fit of the sulks". Not that Kimmie was really a wet blanket; only Dead Pan knew that she was disappointed over an escapade which should have had her in a seventh heaven of delight.

They all caught a train at the Holborn Underground and when Kimmie alighted at Piccadilly Circus she left D.P., who was going on home to Earl's Court, remarking:

"I think that did me good!"

Arriving back at Armynter Court she received a surprise which completely changed the complexion of the evening. On opening her flat door she discovered a note on the floor which had been slipped through the letter box. It was written on R.A.F. Club stationery and was from Michael, who must presumably have brought it along in person. With the note were two half-crowns. She sat on the bed, her heart beating faster than it did at the tennis. She read the note:

MY DEAR KIMMIE,

A real gentleman always pays for his lady's taxi. I forgot. I am sorry. Our jaunt was fun. Again, please? I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did.

Yours, MICHAEL."

She laughed happily. Obviously she had misunderstood him. He could not have bothered to write if he had been . . . She was interrupted in her thoughts by a ring at the doorbell. She went to the door and opened it and there was Rory Malone the artist from the flat below. In his arms he held a large bunch of flowers. He was scowling.

"A young man called. He could not get any answer, so he left these with me. He said he put a note in the door. I heard you come in, so—"

Kimmie took them, her face radiantly lit up. Oh, Michael, Michael! She looked up from the flowers and said in a low voice:

"Thank you so much for minding them. Aren't they beautiful?" A somewhat cynical smile flitted across Rory's face.

"Very," he replied. He swayed slightly. Kimmie looked down at the flowers thinking 'he's a bit tipsy'.

"Well, . . ." she began. Hoping that he would take the hint,

but he stood there as if he wanted to say something. Finally, as he was now glaring at the flowers, Kimmie lamely said:

"I must give them a drink at once, poor things," As soon as she had uttered it, she bit her lip, it was hardly a tactful thing to have said, in view of Rory Malone's condition, but he accepted it without any malice.

"Nothing like a good drink, say I!" He said. "Your servant, Mam!" He clicked his heels and bowed as if to depart.

He looked as if he were an actor in a costume drama.

"Thank you, sire," Kimmie replied, curtseying, with the flowers in her arms. He looked up at her from his bow and gasped:

"God!" he muttered softly. "How I'd like to paint you like that."

"How?" Kimmie answered, as she straightened up from her curtsey.

"Curtseying, in a crinoline with a big bunch of flowers . . ." He said it as a plea. She thought 'I don't want to hurt him. I have what I want. Can't I give him some happiness?' She said:

"I don't see why you shouldn't."

For a moment a great wave of pleasure seemed to take possession of him and then, as quickly as it was with him, so it left him, he stared with bitterness at the flowers.

"Never mind," he said with finality. "It was just an idea. Good night!" he said. He hurried down the stairs, missing the last one and almost falling by his own front door. Kimmie went inside her own flat and closed the door softly. She listened for a moment. There was a violent crash as Rory Malone slammed his front door. Kimmie sighed. She looked at the lovely flowers: "Oh, Michael, Michael . . ." she murmured.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MICHAEL's flowers were the first of many gifts, it was part of his nature; he enjoyed making extravagant gestures. A little theatrical perhaps, but it was, as Dead Pan remarked, nevertheless nice, "to be on the receiving end". Kimmie, however, realised that Michael was the sort of person who would go on making them, always; not just during, say, a "courtship" period. It was heavenly to open the flat door and take in a parcel—a basket of fruit from Fortnum's, or a carton of Lucky Strikes (which she smoked because she thought it made her a little different, a habit which the rest of the Frightful Five promptly adopted; in spite of its expense).

There was usually a note scrawled off in a hurry in his distinctive handwriting something typically "Michael", impish often, invariably pleasing. The very next night, after he had left the flowers with Rory Malone, he escorted Kimmie to her 'bus and, seeing a flower woman in it with a basket piled high with pinks, boarded it and promptly paying the woman a pound, took the flowers out of the basket, dumped

them on Kimmie's lap and jumped off the 'bus at the Trafalgar Square traffic lights.

"What a man!" involuntarily exclaimed a pretty little blonde typist, who missed her G.I.'s expensive gestures.

"It happens all the time!" Kimmie assured her, in a languor which was as amusing as it was artificial.

"Gee!" murmured the typist. 'Even Ed, she reflected, wasn't quite as movie-starish in his gestures as that!'

After consultation with Dead Pan, Kimmie decided not to invite Michael down to Boreham Wood that week-end.

"It's too soon," D.P. told her, pontifically. "You said yourself that there was no hurry for him to see your flat. Well, the same thing applies to taking him home. Give him time, ducks!"

"Honestly, D.P." Kimmie expostulated. "You sound as if you've had a dozen lovers!"

"And," D.P. asked impassively, "who is to say I have not?"

"Not me!" Kimmie laughingly confessed. "I don't know *what* goes on in Earl's Court!"

"*Or* comes off!" D.P. reminded her.

"D.P.!"

"Don't pretend to be shocked, you remind me of that pious little hypocrite Joan Davidson!" Dead Pan said.

"Oh, D.P." Kimmie said, impulsively. "Isn't it marvellous about Michael?"

"I told you it would be all right," D.P. replied reassuringly.

"When shall I invite him?"

"And me!" D.P. reminded her.

"Of course you, too!"

"Don't worry, I'll be busy that week-end!"

"Don't be absurd, D.P. When?"

"Not this week-end, the next."

"It's ages to have to wait!"

"All of nine days!"

"You're completely unsympathetic!"

"Completely!" D.P. agreed, unmoved. "Are you turning out the flat Saturday morning?"

"Yes, I shan't go home till after lunch. I've dropped Diddy and Luff a postcard."

"Would you like me to give you a hand?"

"Yes, please, if you would."

Every week, usually on a Saturday, because there were no classes at the Banderton, Kimmie, in slacks, a silk handkerchief tied round her honey-coloured hair, sandals and a sweat shirt (which Kimmie, carefully schooled by Diddy Blaxland, referred to in her English idiom as a "wind-cheater"), gave flat 7A a good drubbing, sometimes assisted by Dead Pan Hockey-Marking who usually wandered over by the time the "hard parts" such as the floors, small oven, bath and lavatory had been gustily attacked by Kimmie. D.P. invariably fiddled with the

washing up and stooged around with a duster, but it was pleasant to have her there, just for company.

This Saturday, D.P., arriving when Kimmie had the main room in a state of upheaval, had to wait patiently outside the flat whilst Kimmie moved the table in order that she could admit her friend. Whilst D.P. stood there, whistling tunelessly, Rory Malone came out of his flat and peered up over the banister rails. He started slightly when he found that D.P. was standing there.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I thought Kimmie—er—Miss Blaxland was in trouble—I heard whistling."

"That was me!"

"Yes. So I see. . . ." Rory paused. He would have liked to have made friends with this pale-faced pal of Kimmie's whose eyes showed him only suspicion and hostility.

"I take it it's Amami morning!"

D.P. nodded and allowed a sixth carbon smile to flit, for a moment only, across her face.

"If I can help at all in the way of lifting anything . . . " he said.

"Thanks. I'll tell Kimmie," D.P. assured him. She thought 'He looks very attractive in the mornings, when he's unshaven and rather wild-looking. I think he's mad about Kim. It must be hell for him.' Suddenly, softening, she said:

"Perhaps you'll take a cup of coffee with us, we'll be having it soon. I usually go and get it at the Milk Bar for Kimmie."

Rory's face changed strangely. He looked as if he were going to burst into tears. There was a poignant pause made more impressive by the realisation that this dark, tempestuous young man, cynical and hurt, who was suddenly brimming with gratitude, was soft under the skin, like a pat of butter. It was a trifling gesture and, once she had made the offer, D.P. found herself wondering why she had done so, and she began to 'freeze up' towards him inside again. At this moment, Kimmie opened the flat door, whisking a wisp of hair away from her face which was smudged with grime and, apologising cheerfully for keeping Dead Pan waiting, began:

"If you got here earlier, you lazy slug—" she stopped short when she saw Rory at the banisters looking up at her. D.P. quickly turned to him and said:

"I'll give you a call."

He nodded gratefully. There was something dog-like about him, shaggy, brown-eyed, obedient, D.P. thought 'He's the sort of man who'd become a girl's slave, if he was handled right. Rather nice, if one wanted to be a beast'. She hustled Kimmie into the flat and closed the door.

"I say, doesn't he look *hell* in the mornings?" Kimmie observed, in a whisper.

"I've done a mad thing!" D.P. said, in a low voice.

"Heavens, how exciting!"

"No, not anything exciting. I've become a fairy godmother, but only for a minute and quite by accident!"

"What do you mean?"

"I've asked him in!"

"Who?"

"Your artist chum."

"Rory Malone? In here?"

"Yes. I'm sorry," D.P. replied quickly. "I don't know why I did it, except he's so crazy about you I think he'd wilt over the week-end and die, so I suddenly became a girl guide and did my kind deed for the day."

"But Dead Pan—are you crazy? Today of all days—and look at me!" Kimmie expostulated.

"I know!" agreed D.P. "Can't understand myself. But still," she consoled her friend, "after he's seen how awful you look when you're not tarted-up, he might not be so keen."

"You are a nit, honestly!"

"I know, I know. I can't think what came over me. Oh well, he can't stay long!" D.P. replied.

"You're telling me."

"Shall I get the coffee now?"

"What a hog, you are. You come over here when I've practically finished and the first thing you do is ask if you can get the coffee—"

"And a sandwich!" D.P. added. "Must fill the inner Mary!"

"All right. I'll get a jug for you, you'll slip on the soap and ruin all your chances."

"O.K." said D.P. and added: "I say, I've a piece of news for you. Charles rang me. Mother answered the telephone and I could tell from the way she was preening herself and replying—you know, as if she had a couple of plums in her mouth—that it was Charles. She thinks Charles is wonderful!" D.P. said.

"What was the gen?"

"Wanted me to go to a flick."

"The snag in going to the flicks with the gang is that they can't afford really good seats and you don't like to be a snob," Kimmie confessed.

"I know but that's the point. It *isn't* with the gang."

"What? You and Charles alone?"

D.P. nodded. "Booked seats. Charles has got oodles of cash and if it wasn't for Harry and Eustace, he'd always go in the top-price seats."

"Charles Grafton has invited you out alone, D.P.?"

"Yes. It is amazing."

"But you never stop going at one another hammer and tongs!"

"Don't worry. He started off the invitation with the explanation that he'd been let down."

"Well I'm dashed, I——"

"Don't worry, I know Charles! It probably took him an hour to telephone. Humbling himself!"

"But D.P. how amusing!"

"I know he'd rather it was you. He wouldn't lower himself to ask

you. He's hoping you'll ask him. With me he thinks it doesn't matter," D.P. told her.

"I don't think it's that at all, D.P. He wouldn't ask you unless he wanted you to go," Kimmie suggested. D.P. sniffed contemptuously.

"A good kick in the teeth often helps a man to make up his mind," she observed.

"You and your hard-to-get technique!" chided Kimmie, handing her the jug for coffee.

"I'm happy," D.P. replied. "Sandwich?"

"No—yes, I'd better. I may not get time for lunch. And you'd better get Thingmebob downstairs one, he looks as if he hadn't eaten since last Michaelmas. There's some silver in the table drawer."

"On me. Penance for inviting him in," D.P. said. She went off down the stairs to the courtyard. One-armed Bert was hosing down the front of the Saloon Bar at the *Duke's Arms* and he nodded to her as she made her way past Priscilla who was arguing with Mr. Casardi about his last order as he threatened to get the vegetables for his café elsewhere. D.P. smiled as she heard him saying in his excitable foreign accent "O.K. Eef I don' get satisfaction, I go elsewhere, I buy outside the 'ome territory!"

"Nark it, Gabby!" Priscilla said. "You're giving me a pain in me stummick!" She turned to D.P. "Verbal diarrhoea!" she explained.

Kid Cato, the bookie, Priscilla's boy friend, was sitting in the Milk Bar sipping coffee and explaining to Min, in between sips, why her nag had fallen by the wayside at Windsor. He broke off to bid Dead Pan a confidential "Good morning!"

Since their visit to the public house with Rory Malone, they had both become an accepted part of Armynter Court. Dead Pan Hockey-Marking, keenly perceptive, had noted this from the way one-armed Bert had nodded and Priscilla's aside as Casardi cascaded his comments on her shop charges; of course, they were natural to Kimmie but now *she* was included in this manifestation of comradeship, she was pleased.

Min beamed and displayed her top salmon-pink gums in friendly salute, and said:

"Want the usual, ducks? Sound like the pub, don't I?"

"For three today, please, Min," D.P. told her, handing her the jug. "Also three sandwiches."

"What cher like?"

D.P. surveyed the selection.

"Egg and tomato."

"O.K."

Whilst she waited, Weak-minded Arthur came into the Milk Bar, trying furiously to concentrate. Min instantly stopped pouring the coffee into the jug and crossed to him.

"Yes, Arthur?"

"I want—I want—" Anxiously he tried to remember. Min tried to help him.

"A cup of nice 'ot coffee?"

Weak-minded Arthur passed a hand across his forehead. "I want . . . ?" Now what was it?

"Nice sandwich?"

"I want . . . ?"

He frowned, shook his head and wandered slowly out, trying to remember.

"Poor soul!" clucked Min.

"Ought to be locked up, I reckon!" Kid Cato said. D.P. thought 'his eyebrows seemed more like bicycle handle-bars than ever.'

"Locked up? Why should 'e?" Min was instantly on the defensive. "'Armless, ain't 'e? 'Ow would *you* like to be locked up?" She demanded of Kid Cato, aggressively.

"I wouldn't, that's why I bought a bike!" the Kid replied, grinning at D.P. "They gotta catch me first!"

"Yes I shouldn't much wonder!" Min sniffed. She continued preparing D.P.'s order when Brenda Swift, in trousers, a short-sleeve pullover and with her tawny hair in a net, hurried in and said with a rush:

"I say, can you *possibly* let me have any milk?" she asked. "We—" she corrected herself. "I used all mine last night. Very thirsty!"

She turned and looked at Dead Pan Hockey-Marking but, although she recognised her, she did no more than smile vaguely. Kid Cato, however, grinned at her with obvious pleasure.

"Mornin'!" he said. He recalled the talk he had had with Brenda at the *Duke's Arms* whilst awaiting his Priscilla. She was a bit of all right. He racked his brain for conversation.

"Thought those flats of yours were supposed to be service flats!" he observed. He jerked his head in the direction of Armynter Court Mansions opposite.

"So did I!" Brenda Swift replied. "The only time I notice any service is when they present the bill for the rent. I get *that* on time!"

"'Alf-a-pint be all right? S'all I can manage."

"That's splendid. Thanks awfully. It *is* kind of you. I thought I'd be away this week-end, so I cancelled mine."

"Oh, that's O.K."

Brenda paid and hurried out with her bottle of milk and, as if not wishing to be seen, hurried into the entrance to Armynter Court Mansions in a furtive manner.

"Very tasty, I reckon!" Kid Cato observed, watching her and then, swigging down his coffee, he winked knowingly over the brim at D.P. When he put the cup down he observed:

"Got to be a pretty clever girl to live at the Mansions," he said.

"I should imagine so," D.P. agreed.

"There you are, dearie!" Min handed the sandwiches over the counter together with the jug of coffee. D.P. paid up, and left as Weak-minded Arthur returned. As she went out she heard Arthur saying—

"I want . . . I want . . . let me see, now . . . "

Arriving at Kimmie's front door, she knocked with her foot and Kimmie opened it, and admitted her.

"Smells good. You'd better get the arty boy up," Kimmie said. D.P. put the coffee jug and sandwiches on the table.

"Remember that snooky mannequin type who was at the pub and almost ruined our evening at the Ballet?"

"I should say so!"

"Well, she lives at the Mansions," D.P. said.

"Hm!" observed Kimmie. "I might have guessed it."

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN Dead Pan Hockey-Marking performed her good deed for the week-end by inviting Rory Malone into Kimmie's flatlet to take coffee with them that Saturday morning, she did not realise how difficult it was going to be to get him to leave. He had firmly entrenched himself in the big chair, and, feet up, so that the household work could proceed around him, coffee in hand and happy for the first time in weeks, he talked volubly. He thought certain improvements could be made to the place: true, his own was a mess but you could not make a flat anything but a mess if you also painted in it. There was such a lot that could be done to brighten Kimmie's home, however. Kimmie looked daggers at him but he failed to realise that he was not impressing her, D.P., hiding her expression by looking out into the courtyard, was enjoying the joke. But after a time, when they realised that Rory had settled in, and Kimmie's looks were becoming more intense, D.P. realised that, since she had brought Rory in, she would have to get him out. Easily she led him on to his paintings, asking if he had yet started on the *Duke's Arms* interior which he had planned to do and for which he had taken them to the pub the evening they had met Brenda Swift. Rory had to admit that he had not been in the right mood for the pub scene.

"What have you been painting recently?" D.P. asked. He could not be sure if she was really interested or merely challenging.

"I'm working on a head at the moment. It's one of Mrs. Starling, you know the little old lady who lives above the Milk Bar."

"Have I seen her?" D.P. asked Kimmie.

"I think so. She was in the pub when we were there. She's awfully quiet, a dear little old girl," Kimmie said. She considered for a moment then asked: "Has she enough character to paint?"

"Oh, yes," Rory replied vigorously. He felt more definite, a more assertive personality, when discussing his own job in life. "In any case, you don't necessarily have to paint strong characters. There's as much to paint in a weak one as there is in a strong one."

Kimmie nodded. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I'd have thought you'd prefer strong ones," Dead Pan said. Rory

looked at her oddly, trying to solve the mystery. *Was* she acutely perceptive? He wished he knew.

"Well, I *did* try to persuade Kid Cato, the bookie, to sit for me, but he was afraid he might be recognised in some public gallery and he said the police had all the pictures they would ever need of him."

"He's quite a *kerrickter*," Kimmie said.

"I adore his eyebrows," D.P. added. "He was taking his morning coffee at the Milk Bar when I got ours."

"What about little Max at the cigarette kiosk?" Kimmie asked Rory. "He's got an interesting personality."

"Yes but he's too bird-like and impatient. I did get him up here for a sitting, but he bounced about all the time, fidgeted and fussed. I couldn't make any headway with him," Rory replied, settling himself comfortably in the big chair, as if he intended to talk to them about his work for the next couple of hours. D.P. caught a look from Kimmie and nodded.

"Well," she said, "aren't we going to see Mrs. Starling's picture?"

"Oh, yes. Please, lets!" Kimmie quickly added.

"You'd like to see my paintings?" Rory asked, putting down his coffee cup and saucer. "Now?"

"Yes. If you don't mind," Kimmie replied, at once. D.P. went to the door, they were determined that Rory's visit was to terminate immediately.

He explained, as he followed them:

"It's in its early stages yet. She's coming in this afternoon for a short while. She's an excellent sitter," he told them, "But the light's not good in my flat and in the winter . . . I hope to have a proper studio by then," he added, with importance.

"Why?" D.P. enquired, naively. "Are you leaving?"

"No! No!" His reply was almost apprehensive. "I mean I won't be painting at the flat."

"I see."

They passed Mr. Brember on the stairs. He was returning from work. A neat and distinguished figure in a bowler hat, wing collar and striped trousers. Saturday was a half day. Finish sharp at twelve. Back to the flat. Change. Pocket of sandwiches. Flannels. And on to the beloved Round Pond with his yacht and his canvas container in which were neatly furled the yacht's sails.

"Now why don't you paint *him*?" Kimmie whispered. "Wait till you see him leave for Kensington Gardens. A complete metamorphosis," she said.

"I know," Rory replied.

"A complete *what*?" D.P. asked, also in a whisper.

"Didn't I pronounce it correctly?" Kimmie asked.

"I expect so, but what does it mean?"

"Are you asking me because you don't know or because you think I don't?" Kimmie challenged.

"Doin! Doin!" D.P. replied, imitating Harry's bell noise and

grinning broadly. It was a pity about the band round her teeth, Kimmie thought, she's got a lovely smile when she deigns to use it.

"Mr. Brember's too shy. I wanted to paint him in his yachting kit, you know the old flannel bags and holding that comic bamboo stick in one hand and his boat in the other, but he wouldn't have it." Rory told them. "Of course," he continued, "he's another weak character but interestingly weak."

Kimmie nodded. "Yes, I see now what you mean."

"Excuse me!" Rory fumbled for his key. 'He looks like a dishevelled gypsy' thought Kimmie. 'He should paint himself.'

The two girls moved aside so that Rory could unlock his door and exchanged pleased glances, at least they had *moved* him! A great gust of paint, cooking fat, turpentine, hair oil and apples was blown at them by the draught created when he opened the front door. To Kimmie's tidy mind, the flat, typically bachelor, was in an awful state, but Rory did not apologise. She could not be sure if he was proud of it as a side-light on his artistic character, which did not bother about mundane matters, or whether he considered it satisfactory the way it was. The main room, in which he painted, also contained his sofa-bed (on which lay a pair of serviceable pyjamas, one sleeve of the jacket needed sewing, Kimmie noticed). The remains of breakfast, including a half-consumed sausage, shared the wooden table with tubes of Windsor and Newton oil paints, a much coagulated palette, a sketch book, a razor and a blade which had fallen into some crimson lake which was in a saucer and was partly soft from yesterday's session. A pen-knife, two pennies and a box of matches, a pipe and tobacco pouch, a key ring and a rabbit's foot were other items Kimmie noticed as her eyes 'took in' the table. What a mess! She stole a quick glance at D.P. who, with an expression of one who had consumed a too-green apple, was trying to concentrate on the canvases and not on the room.

Try as she might, Kimmie could not find any picture that was complete. There were a great number of nudes and one young lady, surprised, it would seem, in her bath, had, she thought, a faint resemblance to herself in that the ripe corn-coloured hair was parted in the manner she wore hers and, whereas her eyes weren't cornflower blue, they might have been hers, though the breasts were far too big. This picture, like the rest she glanced at, was painted in a rather impressionistic way and the detail was lacking; whether that would be filled in or whether it was his style of painting, she did not know. She was not a judge of pictures and, therefore, she could not tell whether the Irishman was any good at it. As she crossed to the window to look at the canvas on which he was depicting sad little Mrs. Starling, Kimmie noted a saucepan of potatoes on a gas ring by the fireplace, ready to be cooked, and wondered if Rory Malone had a daily woman in to do for him or if the girl who modelled for the nudes also 'charred' for him: whoever she was, she was a disgrace! The strip of carpet which spread its dusty length from the bed-sofa to the table and stopped abruptly there (whether because that was all he could afford or whether because he

wanted boards where he painted, she knew not), was full of blotches, grease stains, paint blobs where he had gone to the door, brush in hand, and so many crumbs that D.P., who had not seemed to notice anything, observed later "My dear, I wasn't sure if it was confetti or dandruff!"

"What do you think of it?" Rory asked them.

There was a long pause whilst the girls looked at the painting and Rory, feigning indifference, waited in an agony of apprehension.

"It's certainly Mrs. Starling!" D.P. finally admitted but in such a non-committal way that he could not be sure if she approved. 'Naturally *she* would crab anything I did but what about my lovely Kimmie?'

Kimmie, realising that D.P. as usual had been too frank, responding quickly and rather guiltily said:

"It's splendid!"

D.P. moved closer and pinched Kimmie's posterior. Kimmie quickly stifled a giggle and blushed. She did not want him to think they were making fun of his work; that would be terrible. She found it difficult to decide about the painting. She knew that he was too sensitive to accept a candid opinion (why *did* those sort of people invite criticisms, when they wanted praise?). You could recognise Mrs. Starling and, too, the painting was unfinished, but, somehow, it was still a *painting* of Mrs. Starling and *not* Mrs. Starling! She did not know quite what she meant by that, but there was, and she was sure of this, a feeling of unimportance about his work. That might have been because he did not greatly care. It was as if he were not putting his soul into his work. She wondered if he would bother to finish Mrs. Starling. The nudes were much better, they were stronger. He seemed to have 'attacked' the canvases and the strokes were bolder. She wondered if he would like to hear this and, after hesitating, she remarked:

"I prefer your nudes, you know."

She turned to him and found him blushing as furiously as she had when D.P. had pinched her.

"Oh. Do you?" he replied. He looked quickly from Kimmie to Dead Pan and back to Kimmie again as if, by eyeing them separately, he could intercept a look passing between them; but D.P. was as surprised at Kimmie as he was, for D.P. had also seen the nudes under the table and behind the easel, some eight or a dozen of them, and it was quite clear to her that they were all supposed to be Kimmie.

"They're *bolder*, if you know what I mean. I—" Kimmie told him innocently. D.P. smiled sardonically and looked out of the window. Now what would he say to that?

"Well, I . . ." the libidinous Irishman swallowed. She hadn't recognised herself, that was something. If he had thought that Kimmie would be down that morning to see his work, he would, if she had been alone, have displayed all the nudes he had made of her, and, perhaps persuaded . . . oh glory it might have been wonderful! But with the cynical friend they called Dippy, like an impassive white owl, watching, watching, all the time watching, he would have hidden the damned things. He eventually stalled with:

"They are in a different style."

"Lustier!" suddenly, quietly and with irony, Dead Pan had said it.

It was like a crack from a whip. Rory spun round and looked at Dead Pan Hockey-Marking but she continued to stare down into the courtyard. "There goes Mr. Brember now. He hasn't wasted any time!" She said, casually, having gained her point, telling him she *knew* (she would, of course!)

Kimmie moved to the window and Rory followed. He was so near her he could have taken her into his arms, from behind. He could have crushed his face into the back of her neck and breathed the beauty of her skin. He could . . . but he couldn't, that was the whole point. That was the unfairness of it all. 'Why is she denied me, the only girl I have ever really wanted?' Her white-faced friend, smirky, worldly, a worldliness made more intolerable because, in all probability, she was still a virgin, spoke again:

"Isn't the yacht a beauty!"

"Yes. He'd die if he lost it," Kimmie said. "The bamboo stick with the rubber blob on the end is to ward the yacht off from grounding or crashing the sides of the pond."

"You know a lot about it!" Rory remarked.

"I haven't spent my summer holidays at Frinton for nothing!" Kimmie said.

"You haven't been to Frinton since before the war!" said D.P.

"Why are you always so unnecessarily direct?" Kimmie asked.

A sudden light, an appreciation, appeared in Rory's dark eyes. He turned to confront the one called Deepy. Well, my fine, knowledgeable friend, how did you like *that*? But D.P., clearing her throat, a habit of hers, added: "It's me aggravatin' nature!"

"Is he going to lunch at the Milk Bar?" Rory asked. He knew the answer, but he wanted to keep talking.

"Oh, no. He collects his sandwiches from Min. It's a regular Saturday performance."

"He lives for the week-end," Rory said, who usually died during it.

"Yes. Yes, that's it!" Kimmie agreed.

"Have you ever seen him, at the Pond, I mean?" Rory asked.

"Yes. But we didn't like to go too close, in case he thought we were spying on him."

"Was it interesting?"

"Well, yes. He was so obviously enjoying it. You know, the crowd of small boys intently watching, the adjustment of the sails, and, er,—pompous little conferences with other yacht owners. Quick important looks at the sky to see what the wind was going to do—all that," Kimmie revealed and added with a laugh: "There you are, I've painted the picture for you. You ought to go up and put it on canvas!"

"It's a form of exhibitionism," D.P. remarked.

"No, I don't think so," Kimmie replied. Rory wondered, was she still defending him? Was it more *double-entendre*? He looked defiantly

at D.P. whilst Kimmie continued: "He really enjoys it. Though, I agree, I think he'd miss the small boys and all that, if they weren't there. I think it's important to him."

"I agree," Rory said. "Naturally one wants approbation but, if you're keen on your job—or hobby, you like praise, but you don't need it."

"I'm not sure about that," Dead Pan objected. "It depends on your personality a great deal." She had turned and was facing Rory, looking at him. There was something sinewy, strong, feline, tigery about her. Great white tiger! He wanted to shoot her down: pallid-faced, with a great gash of lipstick like a sword-thrust in the middle, the cold grey eyes challenging him and her dark hair framing the imperious unattractive-attractiveness of her enigmatic face; supercilious, matter-of-fact, direct, knowledgeable, teen-age bitch!

He did not deign to answer.

Kimmie could feel the tension between them. They loathed one another and Kimmie knew that Dead Pan was by far the stronger of the two. Was it only a few minutes ago that Dead Pan had softened for a few seconds and pitied him and invited him to take coffee with them? Now the mood had changed like an April day. Moody and gusty and changeable, were human natures! She must try another subject.

"It is a fascinating flat. I'd like to come down again," she said. She hoped not, but he wanted balm for his wounded heart. Why should she not apply it? She had—D.P. was right, of course,—been the cause of its hurt—she should, in fairness, dress it with unguent; if necessary she would visit him again, she owed him that, even if it was a nuisance.

"Will you?" He turned from glowering at D.P. and smiled winningly at her. "I promise I'll have it cleaned up, next time!"

"Did you get the contract at Odhams?" Dead Pan asked, sauntering lazily from the window.

Insolent little swine! She was capable of knocking the confidence out of him with a single well-aimed sentence.

"I think so," he faltered.

"Yes. I do like the nudes, *especially* the nudes," Kimmie interrupted quickly, turning to go. What was the matter with these two?

"You should!" D.P. said, pointedly.

Rory hurriedly crossed the room to open the door for them. There was no need to think up excuses for leaving, no need to tell him about the train Kimmie intended to catch. They were out of the flat with very little trouble. Very little trouble indeed.

"Are you going away this week-end?" He addressed his remark to Kimmie.

"Yes. I'm going home," she told him.

Saturday afternoon, Saturday night, midnight. Sunday early morning, Sunday dawn. Sunday morning and afternoon. All dead. Dead days. Dead hours. An empty world, a longing. Hours of waiting. Leadened, dull grey hours, ticking slowly by. Oh Kimmie . . . ! He wanted to say something, but felt D.P. watching, cat-like, disdainful.

"I hope you enjoy it."

"Thanks."

If she said: "See you, I expect, Sunday night," he would take it literally and hang about for her. It was better to say nothing except "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye—thanks for the coffee!"

"Thanks for showing us your paintings."

They clattered childishly upstairs. Rory closed the door and stood as if he had been pinned to it. *Well, Rory boy, you see it didn't quite work out the way you expected, did it? She came to see your paintings, but she came in the daytime and she was not alone and you're no nearer knowing her than you were before, for that pasty-faced pal of hers hasn't exactly taken a liking to you: she must have been asked by Kimmie to invite you to coffee, she would never have done so off her own bat.* Oh, Kimmie, if you knew how my inside is all burned up for love of you. Now, *Rory, now Rory boy, aisy, aisy . . . no dramatics, you lickerish rogue, you!* I've tried, God knows I've tried! Wasting paint and canvas to put old Ma Starling on record, watery, jelly-like, dull. Trying to get Maxie from the fag kiosk to sit still for just fifteen minutes . . . Who was this man who came, bringing her flowers? "I'm so sorry to trouble you. I can't get any reply from Miss Blaxland's flat. I wonder if you'd mind, sir, looking after these till she gets back?"

"Sir." Was that sarcasm, perhaps? His eyes had travelled over the painty trousers, the old shirt, the sandals. O.K. I'm an artist, I paint! I don't have to look all dandied up! Who was her man friend? He had a razor keen face, penetrating eyes, his hair was carefully slicked back, not towsy, not unkempt, not lackadaisical. Was this more her type? Who was he? Why should he leave his flowers with me? I'd bring her flowers if I had the dough. "They could use a drop of water." They could, could they? Well, they won't bloody get it, chum! A nice friendly smile, all pals together, what? He had nearly thrown the flowers out of the window; given them to Queenie at opening time to decorate the gin bottles at the *Duke's Arms*. "Would you mind?" Not much! Did this young man stay with her at week-ends? Perhaps they went riding on Sunday. Two smart figures, together, riding to a copse. The horses draw close, their flanks touch, the riders' hands touch. . . . *Oh, pretty! Oh fine! Oh vastly well thought up, Rory. Go on, have a good worry. Pick away at it. Enjoy your week-end in your fashion!* but I can't help it, I can't help it. . . .

. . . "But didn't you realise the nudes were *you*?" D.P. was saying as Kimmie washed up the coffee cups and she dried them.

"Well, I did think *one* was like me!" Kimmie admitted.

"I wonder if he was pleased you didn't recognise them or annoyed because you didn't."

"That's Irish."

"Well, so's he. And madder than most! Mad for you, I mean!" D.P. qualified.

"He is a bit *wild*."

"Wild! That weak-minded whosit—"

"Arthur."

"—Arthur, he's sane compared with this loon. I'm not sure you're safe with him living on the floor below," Dead Pan said with a serious face. "I wouldn't like it."

"I can't understand you." Kimmie replied. "You asked him in for coffee then you behaved so rudely to him I thought he was going to slap your face."

"He'd have received a swift kick if he had touched me!" Dead Pan replied belligerently. "He's so—so wet," she added.

"I don't know how I'm going to appease him," Kimmie said.

"I do!" said D.P. quickly.

"D.P. Hockey-Marking!"

"I know, I'm a vulgar-minded little troll."

"You're an outspoken ass!"

"Thanks for watering it down!"

The two girls finished washing-up. Kimmie sighed, looking round the flat.

"You don't know how I miss Armynter Court when I go home for week-ends, D.P." she said. "Luff and Diddy are wonderful, of course, and it's so comfy in a higgledy-piggledy way at home, but this flat's *me*, it's London—it's—"

"Excitement?"

"Yes—the Big City, hub of the Universe—all that . . . "

"And heaven, too, now Mr. Dane's on the visiting list!"

"I missed him the one time he called, I wonder how he found the number?"

"Not very difficult, if he knew it was Armynter Court."

"The terrible thing is that he left the flowers he brought me with Rory Malone."

"What? You never told me that before."

"I know. Isn't it awful?"

"Oh, it's rich! Oh that's too good to be true!" Dead Pan laughed uproariously. Below, still standing with his back to the door, Rory heard the laughter and stiffened. The girl called Dippy. The mocking one. The lines from his nose to the corners of his mouth, deepened. Laugh, you bitch, you! Enjoy it! One day . . . one day . . .

Upstairs in Kimmie's flat, Dead Pan was plying Kimimie with questions.

"What did Michael say? What did Rory Malone do?"

"I don't know. Rory brought them in. He was sort of upset—"

"Sort of upset! I bet he was livid!"

"It's very unkind of you to be such a meanie."

"I know, but it is rather funny!"

"You're a nasty-natured piece and I don't know why I like you."

"I agree, just the right company for Charles Grafton!"

"It's funny Charles giving you the old woo-woo."

"Not really."

"It's funny that Charles with his caustic cracks will probably do better in life than heaps of nicer people at Banderton's."

"Survival of the fittest and all that," D.P. explained, vaguely.

"Still, I'd rather not be a big star if it meant being hard, like Charles."

"You. You'd settle for a wedding ring and a cottage in the country."

"You bet I would!" Kimmie replied, fervently. Then added: "But there is a lot to be said for London!"

"Come on, Londoner, or you'll never get to Hertford," D.P. said.

"Maybe that's what I have in mind!" Kimmie replied.

"You said you'd go home—and home you go!" D.P. told her with firmness. "I'm partly responsible for you when you're in town and—"

"All right! All right! I was only kidding!" Kimmie said.

"Like hell you were! You're hoping that there'll be a last-minute ring at the door and the Boy Wonder of the West End will appear to take you off to the Berkeley Butt."

"More likely to the Ivy," Kimmie corrected her. "But I wouldn't mind if it were Casardi's!"

"Casardi's!" D.P. looked pained. "I'd settle for Min's Milk Bar but Gabriele's so-called restaurant is guaranteed to put me off food for weeks. Why," she added maliciously, "it's even more of a pigsty than Rory Malone's!"

"Can't you leave that poor man in peace?" Kimmie asked.

"Can't you?" D.P. replied.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHEN Brenda Swift took the bottle of milk back to the flat from the Milk Bar, Ralph Checker was sitting up in bed reading the picture paper which Brenda had delivered to her each day, scowling at it, and wishing it was *The Times*. He had a hangover and he was thirsty. There was no milk in the flat and he was annoyed at Brenda for not organising things better. He rubbed his unshaven chin looked up and glared hostilely at her.

"O.K. I've got some from the Milk Bar."

Ralph grunted.

"It never rains but it pours," he remarked.

"He would!" Brenda thought and, not to be out-done, added:

"And a watched pot never boils!"

Ralph considered this for a moment.

"What's that got to do with it?" he demanded.

"Nothing!" she said sweetly and went out into the kitchen to make the tea. It was typical of Ralph, without any warning, to stay the night, just when she least wanted him at the flat. Judy had suggested that

Strawberry O'Toole-Carruthers could drive them to the races and horse racing was one of the few pastimes in which the Quality indulged, that Brenda really enjoyed. Ralph usually went to his home at Westcliff Friday nights and stayed for the week-end. There was a convenient train just after midnight which whisked him to the wilds; at least, that is what she had been led to believe; and that sufficed. No questions asked, and a girl could organise her week-end accordingly. But Ralph, had apparently put over rather a good deal for his butter scotch people, and had felt in the mood to celebrate. So they had gone on a binge and the twelve-twenty left Fenchurch Street without Ralph Checker. When they reached Armynter Court Mansions, Ralph was aggressively 'tight' and wanted to fight someone. Since Brenda was the only person present, he wanted to pick an argument with her. The only thing that stopped him roaring was the fear she instilled of people knowing that he was at his mistress's hide-out, cock-eyed drunk—he, the well-known London business man. That quietened him. Though why he should imagine anyone cared, Brenda would not know. But it was one of the clubs that she could always swing and know it would crash home on Ralph's wuzzy-headed skull. It was the chink in the wood pile—or was it armour? His Achilles' heel. Whatever it was, it spelt "behave". She often heard the expression Achilles heel, and thought for a long time that it had something to do with the American Olympic games. Judy put her wise. Judy once spent twelve weeks with an Oxford man at Oxford. Twelve weeks and not a day more. Judy was inclined to carry rationing too far. Musing, angry-eyed, she removed her hair net and let the tawny strands wash round her face. She wished she could fish up that idea which never quite bobbed to the surface but which was vaguely nagging at her. Oh, well, when it was 'made', when it was 'ready', it would plop up into the clear. What was the matter with her? Ralph was O.K. Everyone had an occasional liver. She should have had milk in the flat. She should have realised that he might have become a bit stinking at the Club Dido, and miss the Westcliff train. She should have realised that it never rained but it poured, as Ralph said; though she concluded that Ralph meant he also had a headache. There would be racing another time. She had toyed with the idea of asking Ralph if he would like to go, but she realised that it would be practically impossible to kick any conversation around when Ralph and Strawberry O'Toole-Carruthers were together in the same group; they just would not mix. Ralph was big business, stocks and shares, American jokes (sometimes), somewhat palsy-walsy. Strawberry was staccato and Eton. That was also Judy's crack, but Brenda believed she had heard it before. No; it would be O.K. to go to the races with Judy and Co. and be with her mob, or go with Ralph and his gang, but not a mixed bag. But why not get out of going with Judy and Strawberry and ask Ralph to take her? Brenda suddenly cheered up. She carried the tea things back into the bedroom. Mrs. Nebbings her "daily", would be along soon, just too late, of course, to have made it but never mind, it never rains but it pours!

"Ralph, dear."

"Rubbish! Concentrated rubbish!" Ralph exclaimed, throwing her picture paper on to the carpet. "Wasting newsprint like that!" He had tried to read an article which, though it meant nothing to him, had earned Diddy Blaxland, Kimmie's mother, six guineas and was, by way of a scoop in the Blaxland home; if not journalistically then certainly financially.

"Like what, hon'?"

"*Make the Most of your Summer* by Diddy someone or other!"

"Why, what did she say?"

"Oh, who cares what she said?" Ralph shouted, querulously.

"Certainly not me!" Brenda replied, banging down the tray in manner reminiscent of her Long Acre days. If he was going to be peevish, she could be peevish, too. It was all very well for him, she had to put him to bed and tried to squeeze a little of it for herself, and he sprawled all over her, breathing brandy and ginger ale all over the place. The penalty of not being independent. O, well, some day . . . she poured out his tea in sulky silence. He sipped it, hot as it was, and breathed more contentedly.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "that's better."

His tone mollified Brenda, too. She remembered the racing.

"What's the form, today?" she asked. Strawberry and Company always asked what 'the form' was to be.

"Uh?" he blinked at her, uncomprehendingly, as he sipped the hot tea, feeling better every moment.

"What's the plan?"

"Well, how would you like to slip down to Brighton for the day?" he asked. She knew what that meant. He would start late, flash down the Croydon By-pass and arrive in time for her to spend a penny at the Metropole and flash back again.

"H'm . . ." she said.

"You don't sound keen."

"I was thinking, by the time you're ready, Ralph . . ."

"What *do* you want to do?" He was becoming irritated again. 'Hell!' she thought 'who was the nuisance last night, him or me? Why should I have it taken out of me, for heaven's sake? Oh, well! "Softly, softly catchee monkey" as Dad used to say.'

"I don't mind, dear, if you want to go to Brighton—the air's always good there." ('Not that we're ever there long enough to draw breath!')

"But what?" He knew there was a 'but' coming along.

"Oh, nothing, really. I just wondered if you knew that there was racing at Windsor today."

"Yes, but I wanted to go to Brighton," he replied obstinately. Oh, what was the use? It never rains but it pours. A girl's best friend is her mother. You can't take it with you. Nuts! O.K. toots, make the most of it. Put a cheerful face on things. Shoulder to the wheel stuff.

"All right, Ralph. It was just an idea. When shall we start?"

"As soon as I'm dressed. Won't take me long," he replied. "It'll be rather nice down there. Long time since we had a week-end together."

"You don't want to stay down there, do you?" Brenda asked, with mixed feelings.

"No. Want to be back early. Got a surprise for you."

Brenda groaned inwardly. That meant the usual quick turn around and out of Brighton before you could see the sea. A mad race back to London and a party at the Savoy Grill with a group of not-nearly-tired-enough business men. They began with "Waal, saay, this *is* some p'n!" when Brenda was introduced and finished with "overseas contact"; "radio tie-ups", "Two-page spreads" and "ten per cent commissions" and by then, all she got out of it, were occasional, very furtive, leery looks from these magnates who would like to make a pass but were afraid, not so much of Ralph Checker, but of upsetting a Deal. Life was a series of Deals. One's wife and kids ran a lousy second. Your mistress was delivered in a plain van.

O.K Ralph. Have it your way. There was an idea swimming around in my mind, it might have some bearing on you and me. I wouldn't know yet. She said:

"I'll be ready as soon as you are."

There was a discreet tap at the flat front door and then the click of the latch as Mrs. Nebbings let herself in. Brenda thought 'I must get Mrs. Nebbings to ring Judy when we've gone to say our race date's off. Hell!'

"That's Mrs. Nebbings. I'll give her her orders for the day," Brenda said, moving quickly across the room and thinking 'I may as well give orders to someone!'

Kimmie reached Edgware with the tail end of the Saturday morning rush of City workers who were homeward bound for indifferent afternoon tennis, lawn mowing and waspy teas. She queued obediently for her 'bus, a war-time expediency to which all but the very independent still adhered, and finally reached Boreham Wood, hungry and unhappy. All the way out to the Blaxland home she thought of Michael and talked to him in a mental monologue. He was sufficiently older than she to make everything really splendid, but the trouble was that he was the type of man who was self-dependent. He needed no-one. Least of all a nineteen year old girl who had set her heart on marrying him. Not that he knew that yet. Perhaps he knew that she had a crush on him. Michael had everything he needed to ensure his happiness, yet she was sure that she could make him even happier, deliriously so. There was so much more in life than being a success and people liking you and going along with the crowd. There was a new life, a new kind of being in such old-fashioned, prosaic things as marriage and children. You could still be a big success, probably a bigger one, if you had the intimacy and joy of married life to go home to; it need not be a tie just because you lived in a world of exciting make-believe. And I'll be very

understanding, Michael dear, about the lovely women you must 'flannel' in your efforts to get a good stage performance out of them, and rich producers' wives who will persuade their husbands to back your productions. Oh yes, I'll be very tolerant and mind the babies—providing you could come home at nights and we can snuggle up in front of the log fire and you can tell me your problems and I'll advise you. Your loyal, adoring wife!"

It sounded wonderful and, of course, so romantically out of reach that she sighed and realised that she was not going to enjoy her week-end.

At home, Luff was busy painting the water butt black and white. It looked simply frightful. He turned when he heard the garden gate creak.

"Hello, Kim darling!" He welcomed her, putting his paint brush back in the pot.

"Hallo, Luff, darling, what on earth are you doing?"

"Now don't be silly, child. You're asking for a sarcastic reply such as taking a bath or playing cricket. I am, as you observe, painting the rain tub black and white," her father explained.

"Why? I liked it green," Kimmie replied, honestly.

"Your mother and I have decided it's too ordinary."

"I suppose it would prove you were losing your individuality if you left it green?"

"It's been green enough too long. Besides I couldn't stay in the house this morning, your mother's far too big for her boots."

"Why, darling?"

"She has an article in the *Clarion* or *Mirror* or *Sketch*, I don't know which it is, but she's so pleased she's become impossible," Luff told her.

"How exciting!"

"I'm really very pleased," Luff confided. "They paid her six guineas."

"Six!"

"We'll have a turkey for Christmas with the proceeds!" he said, exuberantly and magnanimously spending his wife's earnings.

"This is a mad household!" Kimmie told him, with a grin. "We're always talking about Christmas in mid-summer."

"Can I help it if Christmas crackers and Xmas cards have to go to press when people are perspiring like pigs?"

"No, of course not, darling. And if you want to play snowballs with new mown hay after lunch, just let me know." She kissed him briefly on the forehead. He could smell her fresh clear skin, the essence that was her. It swept him back to her youth when he had nursed her when she had measles. Pacing the room, patting, soothing, singing (if she but knew, off-key) while Diddy renewed hot water in Podgy (her child's hot water bottle).

Was it years ago before the war? It seemed like yesterday.

"You still smell like a little girl to me, Kim," he said, tenderly.

She smiled sweetly at him. Dear kind Luff. Her big blue eyes

became moist with uncontrollable family pride. He was such a darling. So was Diddy. They were both darlings.

"Sorry I wasn't a boy, darling!" she said. It caught him unawares and made him catch his breath.

"I wouldn't change you, honey-one, for ten boys," he said. He turned back to his paint pots and began to swish the brushes around in the black and white pots, plopping and purring the paint.

"Go on in before I break down!" he ordered, keeping his face hidden from her.

"You—you chicken-hearted old poppet!" Kimmie said, gulping and, half-laughing, half-crying, she let herself into the small house. She whistled and her mother called out from the kitchen.

"There you are! Are you starving?"

"Of course!" (She wasn't, but she could never say so to Diddy).

She went out to her mother and kissed her on the cheek.

"What's the matter, child, you've been crying?" Diddy asked, in consternation.

"No. It's laughter, really. Happy tears . . ." Kimmie started to explain.

"That young man—you . . . he . . . ?" Diddy began, sympathetically searching her daughter's face, knowingly, maternally.

"No, darling, don't be absurd. Just Daddy and I . . . foolishness . . . I, er . . . we . . . I don't know, it sort of happened . . ." Kimmie tried to explain.

Diddy Blaxland nodded. "It's lucky I'm not a jealous woman, I think you both prefer each other to your old mother!" she said.

"Old mother—the bread winner! Daddy says you've earned six guineas for an article in one of the daily papers".

"Yes. Isn't it wonderful? You can read it. It's in the lounge—no Daddy took it into the studio. Now I can buy you a nice summery print dress!"

"Daddy thought we ought to buy a turkey for Christmas," Kimmie said.

"Did he? Always thinking of his stomach. And who earned the six guineas, I'd like to know?"

Kimmie smiled and kissed her mother again.

"Is it that dimple that attracts Mr. Dane? Wasn't that the name?" Diddy asked. Kimmie nodded and said:

"Maybe, Mother."

Diddy stopped stirring the contents of one of the saucepans and looked at her.

"You like him, don't you?"

Kimmie assented. She longed to tell her mother, to confess just *how much*. But you couldn't tell Diddy you were madly in love with him, down would come flatlet, Kimmie and all. Not possessiveness on Diddy's part; just old-worldiness, despite all the pretended bohemianism.

"He's rather sweet!" she agreed, as non-committally as she was

able and quickly changed the subject. "What's all this painting the water butt black and white?"

"We're tired of green doors and things. We thought we'd be different. Besides," Diddy explained, "your father's trying to think of a joke to complete his batch of six for Parmicks crackers, and he gets an inspiration if he's doing something; it makes his mind tick over!"

"It's nice to be home," Kimmie said, a homey warmth permeating through her. She had not wanted to come out to Elstree, really. There was always the chance that Michael might come round to Armynter Court. Of course, he had only been once to deliver the flowers and then she was out, and one simply could not stay in all day just on the off chance that he might appear. What a pity she could not afford a telephone at the flatlet, that would be a boon! Well, she must be content and happy in the knowledge that she would see him on Monday, Meanwhile, it was very pleasant to be home, after all; and the lunch smelt delicious; in spite of the smell of Luff's paint pots.

Whilst Kimmie Blaxland was lunching at home, her neighbour at Armynter Court, the glamorous Brenda Swift, clutching her daily paper which contained Diddy Blaxland's chatty feature *Make the Most of your Summer*, was being rushed at high speed along the Brighton road in Ralph's Studebaker, with that Business Tycoon at the steering wheel, a cigar in his mouth and an expression on his face which reminded Brenda of a Brooklands fanatic. There was really no joy in going for an afternoon drive with Ralph Checker. To have brought the daily paper was an act of much foolishness, Brenda dared not take her eyes off the road, for fear that, if she looked up from a paper, she would find they were nearly under the wheels of an oncoming Bentley (which had right of way since Ralph would be overtaking something else) and die of shock. It was better to see it all happen before your own eyes; at least there was some compensation in that. Ralph simply panzered on, snarling and biting on his cigar when the less sumptuous cars of his inferiors blocked the road. "The world and his wife seem to have chosen this road today!" Ralph observed almost ferociously. The world and his wife. Typical of Ralph. A rolling stone gathers no moss. Never too late to mend. It never rains but it pours.

"You mean the world and someone else's wife!" Brenda suggested, and was rather pleased with it. It hit too near home for the Business Tycoon.

"Meant to be funny?" he enquired, practically running an innocent family of eight in a vintage Morris Cowley into the pavement. There was a lot to be said for the hobby of that funny old geezer at the Courtyard who sailed toy boats on Saturday afternoons. *Make the Most of your Summer* by Diddy Blaxland. Brenda would like to bet that Diddy Blaxland, whoever she was, did not recommend a mad rush to a place on a Saturday afternoon in order to turn round and speed back.

With swift snappy gear changes in the traffic jams, where the little men trekked on down to the sea in crates, and great whoops of speed when Ralph trod on the accelerator in the clear, they zoomed round by the Aquarium (she often wondered if there were any fish in it, it would be nice to explore Brighton one day), past the Royal Albion and along the front.

"Well!" Ralph exclaimed, as if he had just won the Ulster T.T. on a bicycle, "we made it."

'By the Grace of God' thought Brenda. 'I insist on stopping to spend a penny, even if he has to leave me here.'

But Ralph thought tea at the Metropole would be a good idea. It was a nice idea but not only would many others have thought of it, but she knew that Ralph was an impatient man. She did not think he would spare time for tea, but he did. She would have liked dearly to have suggested a stroll along the congested sea front but she knew he would only ask "What for?" At least she risked spoiling her hair-do, and had all the car windows down whilst they cruised along the front, Ralph fuming at the clanking old M.G. which persisted in holding the centre of the road and refusing to let him pass.

"Road hog!" Ralph spat at him when, eventually, he edged the M.G. owner over on the way out of the town.

'That was Brighton—that was!' Brenda thought, parodying the Shell advertisement. The great race for London was on. It would have been pleasant to have closed one's eyes and gone to sleep, to have relaxed . . . if only one dared.

They reached Vauxhall Bridge Road, nearly rammed an on-coming tram, turned into Grosvenor Gardens and down into Buckingham Palace Road.

"Suppose you'll want to tidy up at the flat?" Ralph asked.

"Yes."

"O.K. Tootsie-wootsie. But don't be long. Papa's got a surprise for you," Ralph reminded her, now in victorious playful mood. He had thoroughly enjoyed the drive. 'I can imagine the surprise all right!' Brenda thought, but, when she was seated in the Studebaker again, and waited for the scowl from Ralph because she had taken "time out" to change, (he had been dozing at the wheel at the St. James's Square Car Park, it was more discreet than parking in the Armynter quadrangle) he merely grinned and remarked that she need not have bothered to change.

"But you like me to change," she reminded him.

"Yeah, but if you think we're going to the Savoy, you're wrong."

"Where, then?"

"To the dogs!"

"Greyhound racing?"

"Of course Greyhound racing!" Ralph confirmed.

"Oh Ralph, how swell!" She really was pleased. Now 'the dogs' really had something. She really could not understand why the Quality did not seem to patronise 'the dogs'. She and Judy often sneaked off

to 'the dogs' mid-week together if their respective menfolk were busy and could not see them. 'The dogs' really had excitement—bags of it, and she adored gambling. She usually 'went down', but it was exciting fun at the dogs, and she liked the atmosphere and the people were noisy and did not hold themselves back, they enjoyed it. It was a wonderful surprise, she was genuinely pleased with Ralph, and, in her pleasure, she forgot the beastly trip to Brighton.

Ralph, of course, paid for admittance to the most expensive enclosure, and she settled down for a really nice evening. Unfortunately, after the second race, there was a heated dispute over the winner. That is, the Judge was quite clear in his mind which dog had won, but some of the rougher elements by the winning post were disputing his decision. Since neither Ralph's nor Brenda's bet had been in the first two they did not greatly mind unless there was a re-run. But the clamour continued and then, to the indignation of the people who had come for a quiet evening, a fight started and the proceedings were held up. One of the rioters jumped the track, sped up to the Judge's box and mounted the steps and, with a brick in his hand, smashed the locked door glass panes and was attempting to "get at" the Judge before the police removed him.

Brenda was quite white when the amused Ralph looked at her to see her reaction.

"Good heavens, what's the matter Brend'?" he asked.

"Nothing I—I—don't like fighting," she said; but she did. Bart, her Yankee Colonel, had often taken her to the wrestling and she had loved it.

"You look like death." Ralph said, suddenly worried for her.

"I'm O.K."

"Wanna leave?"

"Well . . ."

But the police answered Ralph for her. Dog racing was suspended for the evening. There was a groan from the crowd, more clamour and more fighting. The police had apprehended the mischief-maker who had attacked the Judge. As he was being led away, Brenda and Ralph made for the Studebaker. It certainly was a shock for Brenda. It brought the past back most unpleasantly.

"Well, the surprise turned out a bust!" Ralph said, sorrowfully.

"Yes. It did," Brenda agreed. The man the police had nabbed, the rioter, was Fred Smith, her father. With Dad in jug, she'd have to go home and see her Ma. Oh God! Ralph was right; it never rained but it poured.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ON Sunday morning, with the sun bright in the sky, Kimmie went to visit Mr. Dobson. Mr. Dobson was her pony. It was the only expensive present she had ever had. Mr. Dobson was given to her when she

was a child by an Aunt who was not inclined to spend lavishly. Mr. Dobson, in truth, had been used to draw her Auntie's trap but when she went to live in London, Mr. Dobson was presented to the enraptured Kimmie. Now Mr. Dobson was old but just as sweet and just as sympathetic and just as pleased to see her as ever. He was pastured in a field which was owned by a farmer who received a small payment for the concession. The field was some half a mile from the house because it was all the Blaxlands could afford to do about him. Kimmie loved Mr. Dobson very dearly. All childish secrets were shared with the staunch Mr. Dobson. On this fine morning Kimmie set out with sugar in her handbag to see Mr. Dobson and cheer him up and, no doubt, to be cheered by him. His look was positively human. His beautiful brown eyes clearly told her that, though dumb, he heard and understood. Valiant was the word for Mr. Dobson. A very parfit gentle knight, indeed. Mr. Dobson would most assuredly listen attentively to all the pros and cons in connection with the problems of attempting to make Michael Dane realise (a) That Kimmie Blaxland was the most wonderful girl in the world and (b) that the only possible key for future happiness was to marry her without any delay. Thus Kimmie, musing of the things she would tell Mr. Dobson, walked to the field and, passing the *Plough*, going down the hill, noted with pleasure the coloured country and sighed.

There were other kinds of sighs being heaved, escaping, exuded and borne by other members of Armynter Court at that very moment on that celestial Sunday.

The lugubrious Rory Malone stared moodily from the bridge into the mirror-like lake in St. James's Park and wished that it was considerably deeper, he might have jumped in. A graceful white swan glided imperviously along towards the bridge and nonchalantly passed under it. Rory subconsciously noted the glory of its snowy whiteness and how the whiteness merged into a yellowy colour towards the top of its neck where, perhaps, it could not reach to pluck and caress, to cluck and dig and furrow in its narcissan preenings. It was a work of beauty and instantly, not that he needed reminding, he thought of Kimmie. Kimmie, too, was a thing of beauty, coltish but what was more lovely than a trembling young foal? To have Kimmie in his arms trembling with the delight of being there! *There you go, still harping, still hurting yourself!* He turned away from the water and walked swiftly from the bridge, unhappy, unsatisfied, priapistic . . . Where was she now? What was she doing? He tried to visualise the scene. Out riding, or walking the dogs? Playing golf? He thought of her home, her people. What about the young man who came and left the flowers? Was he there? What *went on* at the week-ends at the home of Kimmie Blaxland? Wretchedly he walked out of the park and in to Trafalgar Square. In truth, he would have been very surprised at the modest home, the

innocent pleasure of the Blaxland week-end and the only quadruped was shaggy, aged Mr. Dobson.

In Whitehall, the Life Guards, silent sentinels, a splash of scarlet against a background of discreet drab War Office bottle green, swords across their shoulders, their breast-plates a-gleam, allowed the visiting children to pat their animals' noses with an imperviousness that matched the swan—or that knowing, spiteful, pasty-faced friend of Kimmie's, Deepy, or whatever it was they called her. Deepy knew too much for her years. *Yes, she reads your maggoty soul as easily as a book, doesn't she, Rory Malone?* Rory muttered to himself, glared at a nursemaid, who admired his gypsy-like wildness, and turned towards Charing Cross, . . . time like an ever-rolling stream . . . He walked, wanting to tire himself and, in so doing, to sleep and make the time pass quickly . . . to sleep, perchance to dream . . . of Kimmie? He sighed deeply.

D.P. lay awake in bed at her parents' home in Earl's Court and stared at the ceiling. She considered the previous evening. She had, if she was using the expression the right way, been hoist with her own petard. She had been too clever. She was not entirely sure in her mind that it bothered her. She was certainly rueful, irritated in a way but she could not be entirely sure how she *really* felt about it all. Charles Grafton, the proud, the cynical, the detached, the insolent, the handsome Charles Grafton; number one student at Banderton's; Mr. Benson Banderton's pet, the obvious choice for the Banderton Gold Medal; the much sought-after, the desirable young Mr. Grafton had taken her to the pictures. They had both played their studied part, the seeming indifference to everything, an indifference which applied equally to one another. They were spending the evening together because, although it was all rather a bore, it passed the time away. Yet, D.P. felt, there was an undercurrent. Was Charles Grafton, just a little bit interested? Had her persistent rudeness, her very disinterestedness, worked in such a way that, out of sheer exasperation, he was interested in her now? The snag, the vital, important, overwhelming snag was that she simply dare not relent. Suppose she encouraged Charles, a little—there was always the chance that later it would turn out that it had all been a leg pull, as far as he was concerned. Oh, no. One simply could not risk it. But suppose Charles really liked her? How could one ever find out? He was keen about Kimmie, most men were, it was natural. But she had qualities, too. She knew that. Had Charles Grafton suddenly realised this? In the cinema she had a feeling that he might have held her hand, when he lit his cigarette, he held it, she noticed, with his left hand and he was not left handed! but he was sitting on her left; which meant his right hand was . . . but what could one do? To drop her hand conveniently near his with eyes on the screen, and a pseudo-interest in the film, could not be done without obvious intent. Could one, *dare* one, take that chance with Charles and risk a rebuff? Then, too, when he saw her home, and in the garden as he walked slowly up to the house, D.P.

had a feeling that he would have liked to have 'started something', (he made some inane remark about the summer-house) . . . it was difficult to solve . . . of course, Charles was afraid of a rebuff from her, and that was the problem; she was not sure if she wanted to snub him . . . complex, indeed . . .

The maid rapped on the bedroom door.

"Miss Mary! Miss Mary! Madam says if you don't come down soon, the breakfast'll be cold!"

D.P. sighed.

At the Round Pond, Kensington Gardens, Mr. Brember, in his 'sports clothes', one hand holding the bamboo guiding pole, the other fidgeting with his spectacles, sighed too. A sigh not quite amounting to irritation. Not entirely. No, more exasperation. Mr. Brember, by reason of his nature, seldom became irritated and, in any case, it was not the fault of *Pegasus* that she was, white and still, in the middle of the Round Pond, with not the faintest zephyr to bring her to her master. Contemptuously and with sarcastic squawks, the ducks sped to and fro, glancing with amused disdain at the dainty yacht as she waited for a wind. But there was no wind. It was the doldrums at the Round Pond. Mr. Brember sighed and waited patiently

Kid Cato was also in the doldrums. In his new pin-stripe suit, eyebrows 'at the query', thin long shoes a-shine and a carnation in his buttonhole for good measure, he wandered into Armynter Court, nodded to Mrs. Starling who was jogging off docilely to church at St. James's, Piccadilly, and stared sadly at the greengrocer's shutters. Priscilla, the Duchess, had been very narky the previous evening. They had gone to the Hammersmith Palais and Priscilla looked a fair treat, smashing. The Kid had done very well with the nags; most of his clients 'went down', the mugs! And Kid Cato was sitting on top of the world. All would have been well if they had not bumped into a girl who used to work with Priscilla in the Berwick Street Market. "Bumped into" was right because the Kid knocked her partner for six, and quite by accident, as he executed a rather trick turn when he and Pris were 'going to town' to a snappy band number at the Palais. Priscilla's girl friend had just married her partner. "Partners for life, now, Pris"; and all that. Inwardly, Kid Cato groaned. He knew that for the rest of the evening, the Duchess would be brooding about this. She would think and brood on her friend's good fortune and spoil the end of a lovely week. Women had no sense of proportion. A place for everything; everything in its place. A nice evening at the Palais and a nice ride home. But no, of course there had to be talk about marriage and doing the right thing and the best years of a girl's life. Blind Old Riley! Were there no women who would settle for a good time and all the trimmings without tying a man down? Priscilla being "narky" was very trying for a bloke who wanted a bit of freedom. Too many films, of course. The films did not show you the harsh realities of life; did you ever see a

baby drooling on the screen? You did not. It was all goo-goo stuff on the films and his Duchess had scoffed it all up, believing all the rubbish. You had more fun being free, and still had all you wanted. But not as far as a woman was concerned, a woman wanted her 'lines'. Well, finally in desperation you gave her her 'lines', and it handicapped you and chained you and all the fun suddenly went vamoose out of the window and a squawky brat appeared to be fed, looked after, given the best of everything and the poor discarded husband had had it. Well, that's how he saw it. But you couldn't argue with the Duchess. Strong-willed and determined and—and this was the astounding thing—suggesting that since there were no ties on them, since all he wanted was fun, she could, therefore, consider herself free and in which case, of course, there were unattached chaps like the artist Rory Malone! Unattached chaps, if you please! Like the gypo artist! Always had had a sneaking regard for Rory Malone, the Duchess had. Now she was using it as a threat. Either I get my 'lines' or—! The ruddy nerve of women. Kid Cato mooched round the quadrangle, staring at the boarded-up greengrocer shop and sighed deeply.

Up in Armynter Court Mansions Brenda Swift sighed, too. Hers was a sigh of finality. It was no good. She and Ralph Checker were through. He was becoming so completely possessive that she was hardly allowed to breathe without asking his permission. It had all happened because she had, unbeknown to him, slipped out early to visit her Ma and when she had come back Ralph was awake, suspicious and then horribly jealous. She had not wanted to go to Long Acre and see her Ma, but she knew that Dad would be in jug for his part in the Greyhound Stadium riot and Ma would be alone and fed up and maybe without any money. She had not bothered about Mum and Dad before. She had been toughened, life was beastly at their Long Acre hovel but, somehow, seeing her father being dragged away by the cops, had caused something to surge within her, a sort of family pride. I must get to Mum. Well, she could not go after the Greyhound fiasco. They had not had dinner, and it was impossible to leave Ralph that night. He was staying all the week-end, she would have to be patient and go off early in the morning. She worried long after Ralph slept. It was funny to be worrying about her mother. Fat lot her people had worried about her! But it was a twinge of conscience or something. Couldn't let Ma be alone, with Dad in gaol. Didn't seem right.

So she had gone to the Smith home on Sunday, very early and Ma was sitting in the kitchen, drinking tea, no more weeping within her; hard, and suddenly old. Somehow, even the trip home lost something. When the idea had occurred to her, in her mind it was a touching thing, a fine gesture and she had visualised a fairy godmother atmosphere, though, indeed, looking back, what could her presence have done—except proved she could stand by Mum? Mum was just bitter and

broody and had said that it was just a taste of what was to come. A gaol-bird. A rioter. What next, I'd like to know? Mark my words: the first time *and* it won't be the last. She couldn't comfort Ma because Ma should have been all soft and weepy and anxious for help. Somewhere to turn . . . the warm bosom of her daughter, but daughter smelt of scent that cost more than a bottle of Dad's whiskey and daughter's clothes would pay the rent for a year and daughter only came on duty calls at Christmas, and in a crisis. No, Ma didn't think she really needed daughter's presence. Maybe if she had been like she was before she got fancy ideas. There was, perhaps, a lot to be said for Dad's indignation when daughter went into Non-Stop. Ma had thought the idea very nice. Brenda was going to be a Somebody. Ma thought that she was going to be a Somebody, too. A bit of reflected glory. Well, a bit of the comforts of Easy Street. Ma felt she was entitled to a bit of the proceeds. Ma was a disappointed woman.

Then, to crown it all, when Brenda hurried back to Armynter Court Mansions and carefully sneaked in quietly, Ralph was sitting up in bed watching the door, waiting for her to come back. Jealousy, bitter jealousy, shouts (and damn the neighbours! Damn all he had built up in the citadel of secrecy!) Where had she been? What was his name? She was lying. All that, and more. A beastly scene, and, as she rowed, she realised that she and Ralph had come to the parting of the ways. Finally, since he would listen to no other explanation, she gave him the truth. He did not like it. He knew she was common, but he did not know half of it. She told him all. And he did not like that. Of course, he had realised she wasn't exactly top drawer, but he closed his mind to her background. He did not want to know about it. Well, he heard it all right and she could tell he did not like it. She told him that it was her father at the Greyhounds, she told him about her life at home, and she rubbed it in. He apologised, of course, and had a large drink: but she could tell he still did not like it.

She finished her story and, angry-eyed, she sat on the bed and started to 're-do' her face. She sighed with finality.

Harry Barlow sighed with ecstasy. The podgy member of the Frightful Five coterie was in his element. He spent Saturday afternoon at Keith Prowse, listening to the latest swing records and, after hearing fifty, finally bought two, one of them was Raymond Scott's *Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals*. With some nice voicing indeed. Yes, it was murder, joyous murder; in the groove. The boys had certainly got their boots on. Gibraltar all the way. Harry Barlow was blissfully happy. He tapped his foot in time to the beat. His eyes were closed and a cherubic smile was on his face. He fingered his bow tie as he thought of himself conducting an orchestra comprising Miff Mole, Cootie Williams, Tommy Dorsey, George Wetling, Chu Berry, John Kirby and Teddie Wilson—those, for a start. Man, but they would make sweet music! Harry sighed joyously. His father, realising that he would never have peace in the house until his son lost the craze for

swing, sighed defeatedly. He was beginning to wish that Banderton's had a seven-days-a-week schedule.

Gabriele Casardi, proprietor of the Casardi café in Armynter Court, sighed in his sleep. On Sunday the café was closed and the Casardi family, in their finery, spent the afternoon having what Gabriele called "a nice-a day aht". The nice day out did not start until after lunch this Sunday when Gabriele, deciding that his brats needed "edumacation", was taking them to the Victoria and Albert Museum where, had he but known it, the kids were going to drive him crazy by touching everything that bore a placard "Do not touch". Now, while he was at peace with the world, Casardi dreamed a dream. He dreamt that he had made the perfect summer sausage. It had all happened when he walked by the river with a beautiful lady (she bore a marked resemblance to Kid Cato's Priscilla and not to Mrs. Casardi who was now fat and indolent).

In his dream, Gabriele began to pick a delicate plant by the river's edge. He tasted it and found it good. Suddenly there was a large open-air kitchen by the river and the background had changed to Boulter's Lock, (recollection of a previous Sunday outing), and Gabriele was making super sausages by the bank of the river, and the beautiful lady was busy handing them over to the crowds who flourished bank notes in their desire to obtain one of the Casardi 'specials'. Then His Majesty the King arrived and tried one of the Casardi sausages. Suddenly the scene changed and Casardi was on the top of a high building and His Majesty stood on another high building holding the Smithfield (sausage making) Gold Medal. "Come on, Gabriele, you've won it. Jump!" The King suggested.

Casardi jumped and woke up with a frightful start. Mrs. Casardi had entered with a cup of tea and slammed the door.

"Wake up, Gabby!" she ordered in an irritated voice. It was the only day of the week she brought him tea. On week-days, he was the one who was up and doing and she resented Sundays.

"Me! I am always awake," Gabriele replied.

He thought of the sausages, light and fragrant; he sighed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AT Banderton's the following Monday morning, everyone seemed elated by the spell of fine weather, tempers were more serene, smiles were exchanged with people to whom a formal nod would have normally been adequate; the Frightful Five even said "Hallo" to Joan Davidson and her entourage, among them Enid Webster who would dearly have liked to have been accepted by Kimmie and company as an especial friend but, since her meek overtures were unsuccessful, trailed along with Joan Davidson.

As was the custom, after prayers, en route to the classroom

the Frightful Five exchanged week-end experiences. But, whereas Kimmie knew that Charles Grafton had been out with Dead Pan Hockey-Marking, neither of them mentioned the date and Kimmie had to wait patiently to hear if D.P. *had* gone out with Charles, after all. Harry Barlow had spent his Sunday listening to music, "jivey and groovey" and Eustace Harradine had enjoyed himself with crêpe hair, grease paint and wigs, making-up as various characters—to the joy of his younger brother and the irritation of his mother, for he always arrived late for meals, "in disguise" of course. To the astonishment of his young brother, he appeared for the Sunday mid-day dinner as Long John Silver, and, although he suffered agony at the meal due to the fact that he had strapped up one leg and had to sit on it, the characterisation was received with such appreciative fraternal devotion, that Eustace, cramped and bruised, considered it had been a worth-while experiment.

When the girls had parted from the boys, (for they had a Ballet Class to attend: Ballet was "extra" at Banderton's), D.P. was able to tell Kimmie that she had gone out with Charles and it was "quite pleasant, we weren't nearly as rude to one another, since there was none of you present", but there her confession stopped.

Kimmie wanted to ask a number of questions but, since D.P. did not offer any further details about the evening, she decided not to appear inquisitive, though it was a great effort not to ask for details.

"What about you?" D.P. asked as they changed into their ballet practice costumes and shoes, "did you really go home?"

"Well! Whatever next?" Kimmie exploded.

"You sounded exactly like your mother then," D.P. remarked.

"Of course I went home."

"Michael come down?"

"Don't be silly," Kimmie replied, then added: "but I wish he had! He seems to have dropped me," she confessed. D.P. laughed uproariously. "Well," continued Kimmie ruefully, "at least it's given you a good laugh and that doesn't happen often, heaven knows!"

"Because you haven't seen or heard from him for two days?"

"Well . . ."

"I expect he's waiting for that invitation to Boreham Wood."

"Oh, why didn't we make it this week-end?"

"Because you have to behave like a little lady and not like Joan Davidson. There are certain ethics," D.P. said.

"Ethics be blowed!"

"Nevertheless, they have to be adhered to," D.P. coolly insisted.

"I'd like to see you adhere to 'em!" Kimmie challenged.

"So would I!" D.P. agreed with a further laugh.

The girls padded into the gymnasium where the Ballet class was being held.

"Lucky it's not a sugarless day," D.P. said. "At least you'll see him."

"What do you mean 'at least'. If I don't do more than that, there's going to be a row."

"Patience, my child, as Confucius remarked—"

"Oh fiddlesticks to Confucius!"

"Fine talk! But you'll probably hear from his Lordship today," D.P. told her.

And, indeed, it happened as D.P. had predicted. Michael took the class later in the day and, although Kimmie waited hopefully to be called back after it was over, nothing happened. Nothing happened until the Frightful Five passed outside the front doors of the Banderton and Eustace suggested that they all went in the gallery to see the Laurence Olivier-Ralph Richardson show. Charles Grafton, whose parents had money, protested. Harry Barlow said they could have fun if they all went to the *Glidadrome* where Foxy Clleveland's band was playing a one-night session. Surprisingly Charles said all right. He knew that Kimmie danced well; he wondered how D.P. danced. They had never danced together because they had never wanted to. He still was not sure why he had taken her out to the pictures the previous Saturday. Nor could he be sure just how D.P. had enjoyed it. Nor what she expected. To his surprise, he was finding D.P. a somewhat new experience and he did not know how he should behave. It was odd but rather intriguing. Kimmie was on the point of acquiescing when D.P. said hastily, with an attempt at consternation: "You know perfectly well my mother asked you to dine, Kim! How disgusting of you to forget. We've got chicken, too." She stared at Kimmie, 'willing' her to 'catch on'. Kimmie nodded, weakly and gulped:

"Awfully sorry, I forgot," she confessed.

"Chicken?" echoed Harry cheerfully. "I don't mind if I do!"

"Yes. Fine thing when your friends hoard their chickens!" Charles added.

"I can't ever remember eating chicken!" Eustace reflected sadly.

"Who are you, John Carradine?" Kimmie asked.

"Good old Eustace, hamming it as usual!"

"No, chicken-ing it! Joke! Doin! Doin!"

"I didn't see one!"

"Well" said Charles, "if the girls aren't coming, it's no good going."

"We could get partners there" Harry said, in his eagerness to listen to Foxy Clleveland's orchestra.

"Thanks!" D.P. said with dignity. "If we can't go, grab yourselves a couple of pick-ups!"

"Well, if you won't come and if you won't ask us to dinner, why shouldn't we?" Harry replied.

"How far do you think our chicken would get with all you hogs present?" D.P. asked him. Then added: "Besides we wouldn't see you dead in the house in that revolting shaggy sweater."

"What's wrong with it?" Harry asked, indignantly.

"It needs a shave, for a start."

"And the colour's sickening," Charles Grafton added.

"Good lord, Charles and D.P. have agreed about something!" Eustace remarked. "It must be the weather."

"What's it called, Harry, a Clark Gable Golfer?" Kimmie asked him. Harry coloured.

"No. It—er—it hasn't got a name," he replied.

"I bet it has," Eustace insisted.

"Well, it's called a Clleveland Casual," Harry admitted, blushing furiously, knowing that they would mock him.

"No!"

"Oh, that's divine!"

"Foxy Clleveland—the dance band bloke?"

"Yes!" Harry agreed, defiantly.

"A Clleveland Casual! When does he wear it, out tiger hunting?"

"Or at Lady Whoosit's soirées?"

"No, on the links, of course. Foxy Clleveland would play a stunning round of golf—"

"Using a mashie-sax or an oboe-iron?"

"Oh you're all frightfully funny. It happens to be comfortable," Harry Barlow said, getting on his dignity.

"Look out, Harry's clambered on to a high horse! How is it up there?"

"I can't tell which is Harry and which is the horse?" Eustace Harradine said.

"Which end are you standing?" Charles asked him, smiling at the doleful Eustace.

"I think we've teased him enough," Kimmie said.

"So do I!" Harry replied ruefully.

"And I think the sweater's very nice," Kimmie added.

"It's fair 'orrif!" D.P. interjected, then taking Kimmie by the arm, said: "Anyway let's leave these rude little boys so they can go and pick up three pieces at the *Glidadrome*. Have a nice evening, boys!" she called out.

"Yah! Rich folk! Capitalists! Chicken for dinner!" Eustace shouted out after them. A stately policeman, going into Bow Street police station, raised his eyebrows very slightly.

"Cheer-ho Kimmie, cheer-ho D.P.!" Charles called out.

"Bye, now!"

"What's all this about dinner?" Kimmie asked.

"We've got an invitation," D.P. told Kimmie excitedly.

"Not—?"

"Yes! Michael!"

"When did he . . . ?"

"Never mind the questions. Come on!" D.P. replied, walking quickly down towards the Strand.

"But I'm a mess and—"

"Nonsense!"

"But D.P.—"

"But me no buts—come on !

The two girls hurried past the home-going workers, D.P. in the lead.

"At least you might tell me where he asked you and when and where we're going—" Kimmie expostulated.

"—And a dozen other questions!" D.P. replied. "Your Mr. Dane is a tactful young man. It was all most discreet and we are going to the Savoy—"

"The Savoy. I can't go to the Savoy in this!" Kimmie exclaimed.

"Mr. Dane said you looked particularly entrancing in apple green—it suited you admirably and, since he's a bohemian in the very best meaning of the word—"

"What's the very best meaning of the word?"

"—He won't mind if everyone else is in evening dress. Besides," D.P. added, "we're hurrying so that you can go to the cloakroom. Then we're meeting him there for a drink."

"Oh, Dead Pan, how exciting, and I thought—"

"I told you. Remember the words of Gypsy Mary Hockey-Marking!" D.P. said, cleaving her way through the crowds in the Strand, pushing when necessary, and returning their glares with a hostility that was positively viperish. Now and then she muttered a haughty:

"Manners! Thing of the past, of course!"

"D.P. don't be so absurd!"

"Got to keep weaving!" D.P. replied, coolly, shoving an anaemic-looking clerk out of her way.

"One day you'll get as good as you give!"

"Oh!" D.P. exclaimed, with pretended bliss, "That'll be the day!"

Only when they reached Savoy Court did she pause.

"There!" she said. "Now you've got a full quarter of an hour to powder. He's meeting you in the grill room bar in ten minutes' time. You keep him waiting five minutes. All clear?"

"What do you mean, didn't you say he asked us both?" Kimmie enquired.

"Yes." Said D.P. with a smile. "But this time I know he'd be delighted to lose me . . . and so would you!"

"Hey, D.P.!"

"Have a lovely evening!" D.P. said, cheerfully. She waved and fled back to join the crowds surging along the Strand before Kimmie could protest.

When Kimmie explained to Michael over a sherry in the American Bar, Michael observed:

"A very understanding young woman Miss Hockey-Marking!"

Kimmie nodded. "I say, I wish you'd given me a little more warning. Apple green is hardly the colour for evenings in the West End," she said.

"That sounds like your nice mother talking," Michael replied. Funny, D.P. had said the same thing!

"I've been brought up properly."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Not too properly!" she added.

"Fate is very funny. Sometimes it perversely does extraordinary things to you."

"This is going to be an observation?"

"Uh-huh," he agreed. "You see, I never thought I'd want to take out a young lady with fair hair, blue eyes and a *dimple*—particularly the dimple. I had an aversion to dimples!"

"I'm sorry!"

"No. I've changed my mind."

"Your type is the South American, dark-eyed señorita?"

"Not quite, but certainly something—"

"More sophisticated?"

"Well, now—"

"Don't let appearances fool you!" Kimmie said, nonchalantly taking out her cigarette case and offering him one. But her heart went bumpety-bump. He accepted her offer gravely.

"Where do we go from here?" he asked her, lighting her cigarette for her.

"Thanks. That's up to you."

He lit his own cigarette and noted that she smoked 'Luckies,' and inwardly smiled. She was a poppet! She tried so hard to be sophisticated and she was a sweetie because she *wasn't* sophisticated.

"Are you hungry?" he enquired.

"Of course!" she admitted. "After a day at Banderton's I'm always famished," she confessed.

"Thank heaven for a girl who admits it! Most of the leading ladies I have to deal with on the London stage are always refusing dish after dish because 'they never eat a thing, my dear,' and, of course, can be seen in the matinée interval tucking in to cream buns and, at night, swigging down lager and guzzling dressed crab! Unromantic, eh?"

"Sounds very romantic to me. Chiefly because I've never been in a real show."

"Plenty of time," he said.

"Don't you find Banderton's dull, compared with your *real* theatre?" she asked him.

"Banderton's is the real theatre—in embryo. At least," he qualified, "a good deal of it is. I like Banderton's. I like to see all the new talent crowding along trying to get on the Stage—keen young people, all competing—it's good,—it's good for the London theatre."

"You are enthusiastic!"

"Yes. And I like young people, I suppose the Raf was responsible for that and companionship; the war gives you companionship."

"You can't always remain a Peter Pan, Michael," she said intently. It was the first time he had noticed that she had called him Michael. Her seriousness impressed him. He was a little surprised by her remark. It was obvious; yet he had never comforted himself with it. He hesitated and then replied:

"No. No, of course not."

She thought 'there are moments when he is younger than any of the

Banderton students, but this isn't a handicap, not when he's producing a play or taking a class. I'm young and I'm companionable, so please, Michael dear—'

He cut into her thoughts with the suggestion:

"A real British dinner at Simpson's round the corner?"

"Marvellous!"

"And I must nip in to see the first act here." He nodded in the direction of the Savoy Theatre. "I believe the company's got very ragged. Would you mind that?"

"Mind a ragged company?"

"No. Mind seeing half the show—because I ought to take a look at the second act at the Lyric—"

"Are they ragged, too?"

"No, but—"

"What is this, a personally conducted tour of the Michael Dane West-end productions?"

"Heavens, no! If you'd rather——"

"I can't think of anything better."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"I thought, perhaps, you might enjoy it."

"I will. I'm going to."

"Another sherry?"

"No, thanks."

"Right-ho, Simpson's, then and I'd better be sure I've a bob for the carver."

"Eh?"

"An old Simpson's custom. You always tip the chef who carves the joint."

"A nice touch."

"A nice joint."

"Simpson's or the meat?"

"Both! Let's go then."

"And me in my apple green?"

"Admirable. You look like a spring orchard."

"Spring orchard," Kimmie repeated. "Is that innocuous or profound?"

"I don't know," Michael confessed.

Simpson's "did them proud", and over the meal, Michael was fascinating in the way he described some of the effects he was putting into the play which was due for production at the Globe later in the year, and amusing about the cast, but Kimmie noticed that he was never malicious. She tried hard to get him to be drawn into telling her of his own opinions of the Banderton staff—sad, worried Miss Wentworth, pompous Bingo Oliphant, rotund, jolly, pseudo-modern Miss Kinsman and the impressive Mr. Benson Banderton himself—but Michael was evasive and kept assuring Kimmie that he "got on with

them" or that "I find her interesting" until, in desperation, Kimmie challenged him with "you feel just as I do about them, don't you—really?"

"I don't know how you feel about them," countered Michael.

"Oh be human, Michael," she goaded. "Or at least be reasonable—and feminine!"

"I refuse to be feminine; there is enough femininity on the stage without me having a go!" he retorted. "And don't be such a cat. It would be extremely unfair of me to criticise my colleagues and probably unwise!"

"Why probably unwise?"

"Because I expect you'd tell Joan Davidson who'd tell Enid—"

"Joan Davidson! I can't stand her!" Kimmie replied with an expression of intolerance. Michael grinned.

"I know," he said.

"Oh, you are a meanie!"

"No. I'm being ethical."

"Everyone talks about ethics, these days. It doesn't mean a thing," Kimmie stated.

"H'm. I'm not prepared to argue with you." Michael glanced at his watch. "In any case, at this moment, if the play's running to schedule, Selica Bagley should be making her entrance to a storm of applause. Come on—we're late!"

They sat in state in a top box which had been bought for the performance—and then not claimed—and, apart from an occasional frown, Michael never so much as said a word to Kimmie, nor did she mind, somehow; Michael was doing a job now, and it was right and proper that he should concentrate on it. As she sneaked a glance at his keen young face, cupped by his hand, as he peered over the box rail, peering down intently at the players the light from the stage illuminating his animated features, she considered the possibility of the future. Was this what she wanted? To go through life beside Michael? Yes; emphatically yes! But not necessarily to stay by his side whilst he worked. A woman's place was in the home, of course. Did that mean she did not want a stage career? Naturally she would like both; but a great deal depended on Michael's viewpoint.

As they watched the performers, Selica Bagley, who was upstage, and not concerned with the next few lines, nonchalantly took a cigarette from a silver box on the sideboard by the backcloth and sneaked a quick unseen look at the audience in the upper boxes, to her surprise she found Michael Dane, the director, watching the show. Her performance rapidly changed for the better. When the curtain came down on the Act, the applause was vociferous. Michael nodded thoughtfully.

"Now to the Lyric. That's if you still like the idea?"

"Rather. I say, Selica Bagley soon perked-up when she saw you," Kimmie ventured.

"You noticed it, did you?"

"Yes. How trying for you when you're not here, wondering if the cast are behaving," Kimmie observed.

"Very few are like Selica, she gets casual. She gets her laughs too easily, playing to the audience instead of to the other characters—she cheats a bit on her characterisation that way—" Michael began, becoming interested and loquacious in his thesis and then remembering Kimmie was still a pupil at the Banderton.

"There, you minx, you! You deliberately egged me on. Forget what I said about Miss Bagley, eh?"

"It's all right, I won't tell Joan Davidson," Kimmie promised.

"Now for the Lyric!"

They engaged a taxi from the rank in the Strand by Savoy Court, Michael observing: ("Remember the time when the only possible way to get a taxi was to call out for it in broad American?") and arrived just as the audience settled down for the second Act. This time, they had to stand at the back of the pit.

The play, a comedy, was riotously received and, after a short spell, in which Michael satisfied himself that all was well, they quietly left, amid a gale of laughter, and went out into Shaftesbury Avenue.

"I feel very guilty, rushing you about like this."

"I like a big rush," Kimmie said.

"That sounds ambiguous."

"Not if you have any transatlantic buddies," Kimmie replied.

"Have you?" (Was there a tinge of anxiety? Or was it mere wishful thinking?)

"No. I did know a boy with the Eighth Army Air Force. And he was just a boy."

"Now?"

"He was shot down over France."

"I'm sorry."

"There was nothing to it. He was awfully sweet, though."

"That's the way it goes. Somehow so many of the nicer types don't come back."

"Where to, now?" Kimmie enquired.

"No more shows. Would you like a coffee at the *Painted Bell*?" Michael asked her. But to his surprise, Kimmie shook her head. "We might meet my people!" she said with a smile.

"Wouldn't you like that?"

"It might make you feel that I was definitely a home girl."

"Aren't you? I hope you are; that's what I like about you," Michael confessed.

"As a contrast to your South American types?"

"No. But—"

"Yes. I suppose I am a home girl, but not too homey. I like to think I'm independent," Kimmie explained.

"Hence 7a Armynter Court?"

Kimmie nodded in agreement. Surely now he would ask to see the little flat?

"Where would you like to go now—we could go to the *Boo-Boo* but—"

"But you'd rather take your sophisticated types there?" Kimmie continued it for him, questioningly.

"Well—"

"Of course. I know you, Michael," she said, simply. But she did not: not really, and, he, for his part was not sure if she did. They looked steadfastly at one another, oblivious of the tumult in Shaftesbury Avenue. Then, after what seemed an eternity, he asked:

"Do you think you'd like to see my flat?"

Kimmie looked at him for another moment. What was she thinking? He could not tell from her eyes. Finally she nodded.

He lived in a new apartment block off Piccadilly. The flat was charmingly decorated in a modern manner, off-white walls and cream furniture, square, white and dun-coloured cow-hide sofa-chairs and cream-coloured wrought iron tables. Ordinarily it would have been "cold", but, somehow, special lighting effects, and the thick, soft carpet, pale fawn, and the modern vases full of lovely roses and the fawn curtains gave the flat a very warm cosy atmosphere. Kimmie wondered about the flowers. Who "did" them? A whole-time job, almost.

"Approve?" he asked.

She looked around her.

"Lovely—but not quite what one expects of a big theatrical producer—too tasteful, I think and—no casting couch?"

She could see she had annoyed him by this. He flushed an angry pink.

"Sorry."

"That was not really necessary. And don't make any cracks about etchings, either," he snapped.

She looked at him in surprise. Harry Barlow occasionally joked about casting couches.

"Michael—" she began.

He turned to her, annoyance in his eyes.

"I am sorry," Kimmie apologised.

"So am I," he replied. (Sorry at her jocularity or his own touchiness?) "But somehow," he continued, "coming from you . . ."

She looked up at him and forgot the room but remembered only the scent of the roses.

Suddenly as if it had been planned years and years ago, he took her in his arms. They kissed. There was nothing very special about the kiss. Even she had known men, boys, who had kissed her with more tenderness, with better technique—but it did not matter. This was Michael kissing her. A wonderful happiness took possession of her . . . and there was still the perfume of roses.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FOR Kimmie Blaxland there followed, in the next few weeks, a period of wonderful enchantment. She was somehow more radiant, her cheeks seemed even rosier, her eyes sparkled more than they ever had done before. She walked as if she were able to walk on clouds. In class at Banderton's she would gaze away into the distance, heedless of the voices of the lecture team; unless, of course, Michael was taking her class. At the Banderton the pupils were not 'punished' as they were at a school; at the Banderton the students were considered too old and above that sort of "correction". A teacher would remonstrate or chide a student, but the punishment for such matters as inattention lay in the student's own lack of initiative: that Kimmie Blaxland chose to day-dream was her own misfortune and stupidity, she was losing good instruction. But it was obvious that Kimmie had gained something else; something seemingly more vital. And her relationship with the male members of the Frightful Five coterie had also assumed a subtle change. None of them now was hotly indignant or bitter that she and Michael Dane were seeing so much of each other. It was obvious that her relationship with him had undergone a vast change; no longer the shy teen miss anxious to catch the teacher's eye; now things were on a different level. It was as if Kimmie, emerging from a coltish stage, suddenly discovered womanhood. It fitted her superbly. She had never looked so lovely, in her vivid, catching way, and people turned to look at her in the streets, catching for a brief moment, her joyous delight in the very *idea* of being alive. The boys—Charles Grafton, Harry Barlow and Eustace Harradine, as friendly as ever, as staunchly drawn to Kimmie and Dead Pan Hockey-Marking, had, as it were, moved slightly away from her, but stood sentinel in a ring around her, as if defying criticism of her. Kimmie had fallen for Michael Dane. Well, that was Kimmie's affair and they challenged anyone to say anything derogatory about it. Kimmie knew her own mind and Kimmie was old enough to look after herself—that was the attitude they seemed to take up: her centurions, we. But underneath this atmosphere of 'we're protecting you, Kimmie,' Kimmie, herself, noticed, in significant glances which she now and then intercepted, or in turning quickly to find herself being observed by one or the other, that all three of the boys were affected by her selection; as if she should at least have taken unto herself one of them as her lover. Hardest hit of the three was Harry Barlow and not so much for himself as for Kimmie. He had never discussed Kimmie and Michael very seriously with the others; but he was so afraid of her being hurt. Sometimes, even in the middle of a swing session when, as a rule, he was in a state of wild elation as the music spun out deliriously from a record, he would be brought back to earth with a sudden vivid picture of Kimmie being disappointed, let down by Michael. Oh, no, not that! Don't hurt our Kimmie. Not Kim: that wouldn't be fair!

Eustace Harradine, of course, accepted Kimmie's choice with an attitude that made it clear, under the surface, that although she was making a mistake, he would never love anyone else. That he was still devoted, loyal and true. And Charles Grafton was saved great disappointment by reason of his great conceit. This was just a girlish flutter. In a way, he was glad he had not really known Kimmie in her inexperienced, rather gauche moments of first love. It was just a Thing—a craze for Michael—nothing that would last. Besides, how or why he could not imagine, he was finding himself increasingly drawn to Dead Pan Hockey-Marking. Was she as scornful as she pretended, in reality? Had she wanted him to take her in his arms and kiss her? Would she laugh at him if he made a pass at her? And how did he feel? Would he, if he found her willing, turn and mock her? He was darned if he knew.

Dead Pan, watchful for Kimmie of all the reactions of those nearest to her friend, managed deftly to keep the little group united. She was only interested in Kimmie's welfare, for her, Charles Grafton had lost, for the time being, any real interest; Kimmie and her love affair held the stage. Indeed most of the Banderton Students knew about it. Joan Davidson made sure they did; however, most of them approved, a number of the more honest of the girls admitted that they had wished they had been the lucky one. None of the tutors knew of the Michael and Kimmie business and Michael, after his one lapse in taking Kimmie down-stream on the Thames pleasure steamer during class hours, now behaved with perfect decorum. Kimmie was just another student, while they were at the Banderton.

Now, in the evenings after work, it had become part of the routine for the boys to go off together, not necessarily to spend the evening together but, after farewells outside the main doors, they would walk up to Long Acre and disperse from there, whilst Kimmie and Dead Pan would walk down to the Strand. Usually D.P. would then leave Kimmie to make her way to meet Michael alone.

There was one other person strangely affected by Kimmie's romance: the watchful Rory Malone. One evening he had, from his window, seen her come into the courtyard with the young man who had left the flowers with him for Kimmie. The two stood there, by the archway, talking happily, and Kimmie had nodded towards Casardi's. For a moment, Rory thought that they were going to go into Casardi's and he waited, in some astonishment, but all they did was go across to the steamy windows and look at Casardi's absurd conception of restaurant window decoration—the tinned soups piled up and the pathetic aspidistra suffocating in a pot; a glass dish of cakes with greying cocoanut icing on them, bottles of lemonade, dummy cigarette boxes and tins of salmon; in the centre of the glass window, a tray laid for a meal, with a spotty tray cloth on it and the cutlery laid left handedly, as if the table had been 'dressed' by someone standing in the shop and laying the table 'backwards'. The window, perspiring profusely, had little rivulets trickling down it. Gabriele cooked a good

meal—one dared not mind the dirt and the heat and always steam in Casardi's; it was as if the steam in Casardi's helped the meal along.

Kimmie and the young man peered into Casardi's but did not mock. The young man nodded and then looked about the courtyard, noticing the detail. Suddenly—in a fierce frenzy—Rory thought 'he's noting everything, just as I do. He's an artist—she's fallen for an artist! Oh, God! Anyone but a painter—that would be too terrible to bear. Someone else painting Kimmie—oh, no, no!' And, in his anguish and fury, he crossed to the door of his flat and went out quickly down the stairs and confronted them just as they were mounting the stairs up to Kimmie's flat.

He stood there gazing at them, wild-eyed, yammering and unable to speak. Kimmie, wide-eyed, her hand holding Michael's as she led him up to the little flat, at last, paused, shy at meeting Rory at such a precious intimate moment. Michael broke the silence, easily, pleasantly, he exclaimed:

"Oh, hallo! You're the chap who kindly took in the flowers that time. How are you?"

Rory nodded. 'A painter? An artist? She could not have fallen in love with another painter. Not that: I won't mind so much so long as he is not going to paint her. I will accept the inevitable if he is not—'

"This is Mr. Michael Dane—Mr. Rory Malone." Kimmie introduced them. She looked anxiously at Rory. He seemed even more distract, more gypsy-like than ever. He still stood, looking down at them, practically barring their way up to her flat, as if—as if he forbade it. Then, as if trying to regain his speech, very slowly enunciating, like a foreigner having difficulty with the language, he said quietly:

"Michael Dane—I know that name?" It was in the form of a question.

"Michael's the theatrical producer," Kimmie said naturally; a little possessively, perhaps. Rory nodded. Not an artist, not a painter. Well, that was something. That helped. She was in love with Michael Dane, a stage director. Oh well. It could be worse. It could have been an artist. *It might not have been me.*

He stood aside to let them pass up the stairs. He said:

"I was just going out."

Kimmie nodded. Michael thought. 'The bloke's a bit cracked—or is he jealous? Perhaps he's keen about Kimmie.'

"Be seeing you," she said. She went to her flat door and, taking the key from her bag, put it in the lock and opened it. Rory hurried down the the stairs and out into the courtyard. He crossed to the *Duke's Arms*. Weak-minded Arthur was standing outside, trying to think. He grinned foolishly when he saw Rory.

"Early doors this way . . . Films . . . waiting . . . waiting for the early doors," Weak-minded Arthur explained.

"This isn't a film place—it's a pub. Come on in, I need a drinking companion."

He took Weak-minded Arthur into the pub.

"Hallo, ducks!" Queenie greeted him. "What'll it be?" She fiddled with her piled-up hair as she waited for his reply.

"Two whiskeys!" Rory said crisply.

Queenie half turned to get the order then she spun round swiftly:

"Two whiskeys?"

"That's right."

"Whose the second one for?"

Rory nodded towards Weak-minded Arthur who stood looking at the bottles, trying to concentrate. Queenie brought the drinks to the counter.

"You've not . . . ? You don't think I'm going to let you give Arthur any spirits, do you? Have you gone mad, Rory Malone?"

"I need a drinking companion!" he replied angrily.

"Well, you go and do your drinking with some other companion and not in my house, thank you!" Queenie replied indignantly, her bosom seeming to swell with rage. Little Maxie from the cigarette kiosk entered the public house.

"Evenin' all!"

Rory turned to him.

"Here, you have it!" He handed Max the whiskey. "Arthur'll have a lemonade," he ordered. Queenie paused, undecided whether she should ask him to leave. Finally she said, looking at him in annoyance:

"That's better!" She moved away to get the lemonade.

"Is this for me?" Max eyed the whiskey with relish.

"Yes."

"Whose birthday is it?"

"Certainly not mine," Rory replied.

"Sell a picture?"

"No."

"Come in to a bit of money?"

"Oh, drink the bloody stuff and have another!" Rory said. Max promptly did so.

"Suits me!" he replied, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve. He winked at Weak-minded Arthur who grinned soppily. Queenie brought the lemonade.

"There you are, Arthur," she said, in kindly tones, giving Rory a sharp look.

"Whiskey," Arthur said.

"That's right," she humoured him.

"Two more whiskeys," Rory ordered.

Queenie knitted her brows and pursed her lips. A pity Mr. Flarfey was not present. She was not quite sure if she and One-armed Bert could handle Rory if he became very rough. She moved away thoughtfully. He was a menace, this Rory Malone, a blinking menace, and no mistake.

"Seen our Kimmie?" Max asked, tactlessly. He took a sip at the empty whiskey glass, his lips enjoying the taste of it, still about the glass

edges. "Proper little bitch!" He observed admiringly, but also a little sadly. He had a phobia. That's what it was. He liked really Saucy Bits like the bit of stuff across at Armynter Court, but there was something very appealing about the innocent Kimmie. Well, taking chaps home for a meal and so on, perhaps she wasn't so . . . He glanced at Rory Malone and noted, with alarm, the bitter expression on his face. Then, suddenly, without a word of warning, Rory Malone deliberately smashed the whiskey glass down on to the bar top and without a further word walked out. Weak-minded Arthur began to laugh hysterically. Queenie hurried forward, leaving the whiskeys in the rear.

"What's happened? Where's 'e gone? Hasn't paid yet—Well, look at my glass!"

"So that's it, is it!" Maxie thought. 'Proper narked, eh? Well, I'm narked, too. I suppose we all loved Kimmie—One-armed Bert, Mr. Flarf, and even Kid Cato had a soft spot for her, even if he had his Duchess—Priscilla. Though, naturally, they didn't all feel like he did. But, Rory Malone did. Of course he'd guessed that was the ticket, all along. Well, now neither he nor Rory were in the running. . . . Kimmie had her own sweetie. And jolly good luck to the little bitch!" Max nodded his head as if he had convinced himself with his own argument. He looked at Queenie.

"I think I'll have that second whiskey," he said.

Rory stood, looking at the sun sinking behind the bend in the river. Even now she lay in the arms of another. The hot scalding tears blurred the blood-orange sun as it smiled serenely rose-tinting the buildings making the Thames flow, bleeding, to the sea . . . Strolling couples turned to look at the man, crying in the face of the sun. Looked and turned away. The women, rather frightened by it, turned and looked quickly at their men escorts, as if to seek a reason, asking for a reason. The tall, raven-haired figure with the bright neckerchief, the old tweed coat, the corduroy trousers and the sandals was not an insignificant figure, even in a crowd. Now, he stood, as if on trial, facing the sun, crying . . . great sobs shook his frame. A nonchalant, very phlegmatic young policeman (whose slow, majestic tread belied his thumping heart) walked sedately up to the sobbing figure. The policeman, young, strong-faced, the ribbons of the Distinguished Flying Medal and the '39-'45 star on his chest, rubbed his chin with the index finger of his right hand.

"What seems to be the trouble, chum?" he asked. Rory turned away.

"I'm O.K.," he gulped. *Come on, you great yahoo! Pull yourself together. She belongs to someone else.*

"Sure?" the young policeman asked.

"Yes. Thanks." Rory turned away.

"Lovely night," the policeman observed, breathing more freely. He had not tackled a weeping man on his beat before. He wasn't quite

sure just how you went about it. They hadn't taught him that at the Police College. But the down-and-out wasn't any trouble.

Rory did not answer. He passed through a small knot of people, who severed back when he clove through them.

'I'm O.K. now. I'm O.K. But I still love her,' he persisted to himself.

Sure, sure! Well, that's all right. In fact, I rather like it. And she'll like you all the better for it, Rory Malone. No reason at all why you shouldn't love her—but remember, fellah, she's not for you. . . .

Then, within him, there was a great quiet. It was as if a large wound had been made in his heart and there was a gap there that needed filling. The gap was not hurtful now. It was as if the wrench, when it had been torn out, had now begun to heal. And, with this new mood, there came on him a new feeling for Kimmie, whereas before he lusted now he worshipped. When he met her he was less abrupt, less challenging, less frightening. *Her* love affair had made *him* suddenly tolerant and kind. Kimmie noticed the difference a few days later when, after she had hurried back to 7A to change into her one evening dress, to go with Michael to the first night of his new play at the Globe (they had not seen each other in the daytime for some time, for he had gone off the active list at Banderton's, in order to concentrate on the Shaftesbury Avenue production and met only at night). Rory was leaning over the banisters when she came out. He made her jump when she turned and looked up, catching sight of him looking down at her.

"Oh, you startled me, Mr. Malone."

She could tell from his expression that that was the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

"I'm so sorry!" he exclaimed, then confessed admiringly, "You look enchanting."

It was a compliment given like the gift of a flower; gracefully, tenderly, she suddenly felt warmer towards him. He was a dear and, like Eustace Harradine, you could not despise someone who loved you. She said:

"Thank you."

"Michael?" he asked. He knew and he did not even want confirmation but it was to explain to her in his way that he knew, that he understood, that he condoned.

Kimmie nodded.

"Have a nice time," he wished her.

"I will."

She went down a few steps and turned impulsively:

"Good night, Rory," she said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

At last the telephone rang and Brenda Swift hurried across to it and answered it.

"Yes?"

"Ralph here, dear."

"Yes, Ralph?"

"I'm sorry, baby, I'm going to be tied up tonight. Can you make other arrangements?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. Will you . . . that is, you won't . . . ?"

"I expect I could be over but not till real late."

"Well, Ralph, I'd rather you skipped it."

"O.K. Pet, if it's easier for you."

"Well, then, if I want to be early, I can."

"Sure, sure! O.K. Then I'll ring you tomorrow."

He was being nice and polite since she had "given him a basiful" after the row when she visited her Ma. But things were not, somehow, the same.

"Right-o, Ralph," she said.

"Good-bye now!"

Brenda cradled the receiver and smiled with pleasure. She was hoping that Ralph would not be over, she wanted a night out with Judy Gwendolyn. A new gambling club had opened and the girls were simply dying to try their luck. By putting Ralph off entirely she could be really late getting back to the flat. Oh, goody! She hoped Judy was free. Quickly she picked up the receiver and dialled Judy's number. Judy answered in her especial telephone voice, drawly, sophisticated.

"Judy—it's me! How about the Club, tonight?"

"Oh, hallo darling. Are you free?"

"Absolutely. Isn't it divine?"

"Wonderful—but I've got a dinner engagement!"

"Hell!"

"It is a bore. Maybe I could break it?"

"Oh, do, Judy. Let's go and try our luck!"

"Careful what you say over the 'phone!" Judy cautioned her; the Club was operating very discreetly.

"Yes. Yes, of course. But try, Judy."

"O.K. I'll ring you back."

Brenda, excited and pleased, after sitting curled-up on the sofa all the afternoon, waiting for the telephone to ring, now paced up and down the room, awaiting Judy's return call. She stopped to look down into the courtyard where she saw the one called Weak-minded Arthur, walking up and down, much in the same manner as she. He was wondering where the devil he was going. He would walk a few paces, pause, try to think and then start off again, restless, like a caged tiger. She thought—he is like me, he doesn't know where he's going and nor do I! That's a parallel or something. Weird. Queer.

The telephone startled her out of her reverie, she ran across the room to answer it.

" 'lo?"

"Hallo, Brend', I say, the ass I'm having dinner with, is being bloody-minded," Judy said.

"Oh, hell!"

"Look, let's take him along and we can lose him when we get there."

"Right you are. Shall I come and collect you?"

"Yes, do."

"Can I come early, I'm so bored with this flat?"

"Yes. I've got a couple of chaps here having a drink but they're going on to some stag dinner where they'll all get horribly stinking."

A voice called out "We're horribly stinking already!"

"Did you hear that?" Judy asked.

"Yes," said Brenda.

"That gives you a rough idea."

"Are they primitive?" Brenda asked. Judy could be heard asking the men. "Brenda wants to know if you are primitive?"

Brenda could hear a shout of laughter at this and one of the men tried to imitate a Tarzan yell.

"Did you hear that?"

"I did indeed, I'll be right over!" Brenda replied. She changed as quickly as she could and taxied over to Judy's flat. The menfolk, in dinner jackets, red carnations in their button holes, turned-down soft collars and a lot of breast-pocket handkerchief showing, were smiling pleasantly and perspiring the liquor out of themselves almost as soon as it was emptied in. They were well-behaved and admiring in their glances, but Brenda was glad when Judy pushed them off for their alcoholic evening.

"Rich as stink!" she told Brenda, as Brenda re-made up her face, whilst Judy took a bath.

"Are you contemplating a change?" Brenda asked, applying her Guerlain lipstick with care.

"Well, not with either of those lads, at any rate. Why—are you?" hazarded Judy.

"No," Brenda replied, in between strokes with the lipstick. "No . . . but . . ."

"I know," Judy said. She thought 'you do get that way, after a time. Discontented.'

There was a ring from the flat front door bell before the girls were ready and Judy, putting on a bath robe, admitted the young man who was her escort for the evening.

"Cuffie's in Birmingham," she explained to Brenda. "So I said I'd dine with Martin. Strawberry's away on manoeuvres, otherwise he'd have been better company for gambling. Never mind, this boy is quite sweet. He's an Honourable or something, and seems to have the right ideas."

Brenda wondered what Judy meant by 'the right ideas', but she let it go.

"I'll give him a large drink and we'll feed him another before we go. There's a blonde cigarette girl at the Club he'll be mad about. We'll leave him to talk to her while we're betting. Have you any money?"

"About a fiver."

"Oh that's all right, Martin'll cash you a cheque."

"Will he?"

"Of course, what did you think I brought him for? Though, I hope they don't ask his age. I don't think he's twenty-one yet!" Judy confessed.

The evening was very successful. As Judy predicted, they were able to palm off the insipid young Martin on the movie-star-like cigarette girl while they used his money to play the tables. The Club, very exclusive, highly guarded, very discreet, underhand, illegal and luxurious, by day a nice Mayfair home, by night a smart, sophisticated gaming club, handed out free champagne, and cigarettes. A cocktail bar and card rooms were also part of the "side lines". The owners could afford to do things on a grand style. Judy was very lucky. She won a hundred and fifteen pounds. Brenda, starting with her modest five, lost it, borrowed ten from Martin and won forty. She sought out Martin who was trying to find out from the cigarette girl if he could drive her to Dagenham, where she lived. (She had no objection. Nightly, some monied ass drove her home, it was better than waiting for the first morning Underground train and her escorts never got past first base.) She paid Martin, although Judy assured her it was not necessary, and, pleased with the pleasantness of the evening, she had a final night-cap at Judy's flat before going back to Armynter Court Mansions.

At 7A, Armynter Court, Michael Dane passed his lips lightly across Kimmie's forehead.

"I'd better be going," he whispered.

Drowsily she said: "Must you, Michael? Must you go, darling?"

"'Fraid so. It's been a lovely evening—"

"In spite of all the rain," she finished it for him in a sleepy voice.

"What, darling?"

"In spite of all the rain. . . ."

"No rain tonight, sweet."

"Sorry," Kimmie said in a husky little voice, tired, so tired.

Michael chuckled. "Go to sleep, weary one! Good night, darling."

He kissed her again on the forehead. She grunted a sleepy sort of noise of pleasure which made him grin. He left her side and prepared to leave the flat.

At this time Brenda's taxi brought her to the courtyard and she paid the driver off. As the taxi chugged away and Brenda went towards the Mansions, a figure stepped out of the shadows, by the side of the archway and said:

"'Ullo, Brend' an' 'ow's Miss Smith—sorry, *Swift*, tonight?"

The figure was her father, Fred Smith. She was startled and, for a moment, she was frightened.

"What do you want, Fred Smith?" she asked, anxiously, her voice pitched high in her fear.

"Fred Smith—to your poor old Dad?"

"Poor old gaol-bird!"

"O.K. ducks. O.K. Gaol-bird."

"What's the matter—you drunk or something? What you want?"

"Nothing, dear. Only I've changed a bit, see? I've learned a lot since I spent a few days in the rattle: Some of the boys was talking, see? Telling me I was a mug."

"I should say so, getting put into prison, behaving like a lunatic. I've seen Mum," Brenda said, becoming Brenda Smith again.

"Old 'ard, you got it wrong, Brend' girl, I don't mean I'm sorry, I mean I realised I was a fool, I could be on Easy Street—like my daughter, see?"

Brenda stiffened. She was less nervous now and she was becoming Brenda Swift again, more and more so, as he talked.

"I don't get it."

"Yes you do! That's why I'm here," Fred replied quickly.

"What's the idea?"

"The idea is, dear daughter, that your poor old dad's tired of being a ruddy wage slave—an', since you've decided on a life of immorality—if my meanin's too refeened for you, I'll give it to you plainer—I think it's time I 'ad a cut!" he said viciously.

"Oh? I thought you were so high-and-mighty about me going on the Stage."

"Undressing in public was what I objected to. But, I've been turning things over in my mind, an' I've changed me opinions . . . I'll 'ave a fiver, to get on with!"

"What?"

"You 'eard me!"

"I'll call a cop. There's a night porter here—" Brenda began, bluffing him.

"That's all right, my girl. The night porter's down at the cab rank in the Square 'aving 'is supper. I'm not such a fool as not to 'ave a dekko—reconnisince—before I decided to *attack!*" Suddenly he grabbed her handbag.

"Dad! You swine you! Give me that bag!"

"Not blinkin' likely" Fred replied. Father and daughter struggled for a moment.

"I'll call the police!"

"What, and get us both in the papers? Give me the bag, you little—!"

Michael Dane, letting himself quietly out of the front door at the other end of the courtyard, saw the two figures grappling together and he gave a low warning shout.

"Hey. What's the matter?"

The couple parted. The man hesitated and began to run away. Michael could see that he clutched the lady's handbag. He ran lightly across the courtyard, and sped past the lady, who superfluously implored:

"Please stop him! My bag!"

The thief ran very quickly along Jermyn Street with Michael in hot pursuit. There was no one about and their foot-falls, seemingly magnified by the silence, clattered noisily as Michael, putting on a sudden burst of speed, began to catch up. The crook, an older man, but, nevertheless agile, began to lose his rhythm and to falter a few steps. His breathing was becoming irregular, and he began to gasp, as if in anticipation of Michael's blows. He lost more ground and then, realising that he was not going to get away with the handbag and, by now, very frightened as the menace of Michael's approach became clearly apparent, called back between gasps:

"Leave me alone, you ruddy swine!"

As he said this, Fred Smith threw the bag back over his shoulder at Michael. It struck Michael in the face and the suddenness with which it was thrown stopped him. It had not hurt him, but it did catch him by surprise. The contents of the bag spilled out on to the pavement. The thief, running very slowly he was so winded, was a long way off again by now and Michael felt that he stood a chance of catching him. He picked up the handbag, some money, a lipstick, a compact (which had opened and dusted the paving stones with face powder), a handkerchief, some coppers and a key ring with two keys on it. He stuffed these in higgledy-piggledy fashion in both pockets of his coat with the intention of carrying on with the chase when he reconsidered, deciding that discretion was the better part of valour. By degrees regaining his normal breathing, he walked quickly back to the quadrangle where the lady awaited him anxiously.

"Did you get it?"

"Yes." He held out the bag.

"Oh that's fine! Thank you—thank you so much!" The street lighting gave her heavily made-up face the appearance of a mask. Her chestnut hair, high-lighted by the lamp in the centre of Armynter Court, shone as if a nimbus bedecked her. They recognised one another at the same moment.

"We've met before!" she exclaimed.

"I think we have, somewhere." Michael tried to place where it had been. Somehow, somewhere he had admired the way the silky tawny hair had flopped on to her shoulders provocatively.

"I don't know where."

"We have. We've met," she re-affirmed. Michael produced the contents of the bag, and, whilst she held it open, he put them into it.

"I can't thank you enough," she said.

"That's all right."

"The—er—theif?" she asked. She had difficulty saying the word, as if it had an especial repugnance to her.

"He chucked the bag at me when I was gaining on him. I didn't follow after that. Thought I'd be content with getting the bag back—definitely not a brave type, me!" Michael concluded (she was not to know that he had been credited with shooting down five Jerry aircraft).

She seemed very relieved that there had been no fight.

"I'm—I'm glad. I didn't want any trouble."

"No. Mucky business. Poor bloke might have been hard up."

She did not reply. She was more composed now, and she smiled at him as if she had begun to enjoy it.

"I'd have been about thirty pounds out of pocket if you hadn't come along," she said. "Positively cave-mannish the way you had at him."

"Well, what could a chap—'Cave-man'! Now I know where we met!" Michael exclaimed. "The Ballet—you behaved revoltingly!"

She looked at him in surprise and then laughed pleasantly. "Oh yes! The Aggressive type. We *did* behave badly. The people I was with didn't care for it—what was it—?"

"*Coppélia*."

"Yes. Although I—"

"Did you?" Michael, searching her superbly made-up face asked; he knew she was about to say she had liked it.

"No," she confessed.

He was glad she did not attempt to pretend.

"But I did apologise," she reminded him.

"What's the point of going to the theatre and spoiling other people's enjoyment? I can't see why—" Michael, as the episode came back to him more clearly, began explosively to remonstrate with her, but she cut him short.

"Oh, don't let's go into it. It's a mistake and it's over." She was suddenly 'edgey' and he thought she was still a bit jittery from her experience with the thief.

"Yes, of course. Well," he added, raising his hat, "thanks for the exercise."

She smiled, white, even teeth, rather like a toothpaste advertisement. She said:

"That sounds slightly rude."

He was astonished at her directness. He remembered how she had shaken him at the theatre. Great frontal attacks. A girl who panzered her way through life. He found her attractive and it bothered him because she had nothing, absolutely nothing. She was a play girl. Somewhere a rich father or a sugar daddy kept her in ease, luxury and Kayser-Bondor. She was super-superficial. She smacked of, but was not of, the sort of people who talked loudly at the best places. She was a tramp with a Roedean hat band. He said quietly:

"I didn't mean it to be."

"Oh!" she made a moue, wrinkling her nose, and he found himself deciding that, when the bulldozers had scraped all that stuff off her face, it would probably be a freckled nose. A freckled nose and titian hair was a wicked combination and her appraising greeny eyes . . .

" . . . a rebuke?" She asked.

"A rebuke," he re-affirmed.

She sighed. Affectation, of course, but a gentle, pleasing sigh.

"We seem fated to fight," she told him.

"Yes," he agreed. She sighed again and turned to enter Armynter Court Mansions.

"Good night," she said. She put one of the two keys on the key ring he had retrieved for her, into the ornate outer door of the Mansions.

"Good night!" he replied. In a way, it was an anti-climax. Yet . . . yet what? Leaving Kimmie could never be considered an anti-climax. Well, yes it was, in that he wanted . . . But that was not quite what he meant. What *did* he mean? Twice this rude woman had irritated him and left him . . . intrigued? He felt angry and ashamed. Maybe . . . He thrust his hands in his pockets and discovered that he had still got her compact. He cursed and walked on, then stopped. He wondered if he should just drop it in Jermyn Street or give it to the young lady in the fine clothes and the too-tall heels who swayed nonchalantly towards him ('If you'd have appeared a little earlier, dearie, you'd have been knocked for six by that thief') Oh! better give it back to the real owner. He turned and hurried back. Brenda was in the hall of the Mansions, and had pressed the button for the lift. Michael tapped on the front door, making her jump. She was surprised to see him until he pantomimed through the glass, exhibiting her compact. She smiled and came to the door and opened it.

"Oh, thanks!"

"I think that's about all."

Michael had another search through his pockets.

"Yes—that's the lot," he said.

The self-operating lift purred down obsequiously and halted.

"Would you consider having a drink—to prove that I'm not quite such a drip?" she asked him, adding: "I know you think I am."

Direct frontal attacks again. What had she got that appealed, apart from a great physical attraction? Was it that she knew he knew she could not fool him?

"No. Thanks," he said, "it's getting late. Besides—" He stopped. He was thinking 'besides, I must go home. Kimmie might not . . .'

"Besides, you're scared of me, eh?" she challenged.

"What *is* this?" He demanded. "I don't understand your technique."

She smiled.

"Can't a girl invite a man up to her flat without being accused of all sorts of fantastic malicious things?" As she spoke, expecting Michael to be alone, the unattached young lady from Jermyn Street, wandered into the Court, looking for him. Quickly, Brenda nodded in her direction. Michael turned, and watched her through the glass.

"Do you think I'm . . . ?" (Mr. Flarf would have supplied the missing words for her—"One of Those".)

He did not think an answer was necessary.

"Only a quick drink," he said, "to prove . . . " He did not finish it. Nor did she press him to.

"Of course," she said, half to herself, as they entered the lift.

Out in the courtyard, the tart shrugged her shoulders and sniffed: "Blast these ruddy amateurs!"

She moved away into Jermyn Street. Nor did she see Rory Malone at his open window staring down at the doorway of the Mansions, incredulity, fury on his face. That dirty-double-crossing bastard! That skunk Michael Dane! He closed his eyes and shook his head. No. It couldn't have been . . . ! but he knew that it was. He had heard Michael leave 7A, and, glancing at his watch, noted that it was two o'clock in the morning. No hurt, now . . . just sadness. And then he had got up and crossed to the window and had witnessed Fred Smith accosting Brenda. He was undecided what to do when Michael ran across the courtyard and chased the thief . . . then Michael had come back. He had come back and gone into Armynter Court Mansions with the girl Brenda Swift.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BINGO OLIPHANT, surrounded by the members of the class who were not in the play, beamed up at the stage upon which Charles Grafton as Prospero, Eustace Harradine as Caliban, Kimmie as Ariel, Harry Barlow as Trinculo and Dead Pan Hockey-Marking as Gonzalo were amusing their teacher and fellow students with a sprightly version of *The Tempest*. Whilst Harry Barlow, Eustace and another student plotted in Act Two, Scene Two, Kimmie was able to hold a short conversation with D.P.

"Michael's coming down to Elstree for the week-end."

"Oh that's grand!"

"You'll come, won't you?"

"Now don't be a nit—you don't want chaperoning at home," D.P. reasoned.

"Of course I do. Besides, that was the original idea."

"Original ideas get changed."

"Well, Michael expects you—and so does Diddy."

"Don't be silly, Kimmie. I'll come and stay when Michael takes his new show up to Manchester."

"Oh, don't be a meanie, D.P. We don't have to be alone, besides, what about Diddy and Luff? If they suspect that—well, if they think I'm serious about Michael . . . you know what a lamb they make of me. I'll get in an awful flap . . . "

"Why should they? You want to make an honest man of him, don't you?"

"Of course, you ass!"

"Well, it seems to me," said D.P. the practical, "they had better get used to seeing you curled up with Michael!"

"Oh, do come." Kimmie pleaded.

"And spoil your week-end? You'd have the sulks for days if I did!"

"Well—!"

"No, I'll come when he goes North."

Kimmie made a grimace which caused D.P. to smile.

"I know. You don't know how you're going to exist without him."

"Two weeks!" Kimmie said, as if it were two years.

"What's two weeks? It'll seem like two days."

"Don't try and kid me, D.P. If it were in term time, I wouldn't have minded, but to be at home and no Michael, and September such a wizard month"

"Some people are never satisfied."

"I am, you know, I'm deliriously happy."

"Do you think you'll want to sit opposite Michael Dane's face every meal for the rest of your natural?" D.P. asked her.

"D.P. what an extraordinary thing to say."

"Not at all, down-to-earth, that's me. Do you? That's the crucial test, you know." D.P. insisted.

"Of course. Sometimes I think you're crazy or inhuman or something."

"Not at all. A girl wants to be sure."

"You're going to be so sure you'll land up an old maid."

"May be. But I'll have my experiences to keep me warm."

"Ass!"

The girls stopped chatting to listen and watch the other students on the stage. Kimmie knew that D.P. was right, of course she would prefer to have Michael to herself at Elstree, and it was true Luff and Diddy would have to know sooner or later that she was in love.

"You know, in spite of the fact that Eustace has been gormless in most things we've done this term, his Caliban is really terrific," D.P. observed.

"His *Richard* was grand, too."

"Funny if he got the Gold Medal and not Charles!"

"Not a hope. Charles is consistently good—Eustace is only good in odd characterisations," D.P. replied.

Kimmie searched her face and suggested.

"I believe you *want* Charles to win it."

"Oh, be your age!"

"O brave monster! Lead the way," Eustace called out, following Trinculo off stage.

There was applause from the other students as the curtain fell.

"Good show, Eustace!"

"Nice work!" The girls congratulated him.

Eustace smiled happily. "I *feel* like Caliban," he confessed.

The boy playing Ferdinand took up his stance ready to carry on a

property log for Act Three, Scene One, and Joan Davidson dabbed at her nose and primped her hair nearby.

"That little beast Joan Davidson's doing the Trial Scene from *Merchant of Venice* in the open competition."

"Since she always demands her pound of flesh from any man, she's rather good casting!"

"Miaow!"

The girls tittered as Joan Davidson, playing Miranda, moved with grace on to the stage to confront Ferdinand, first poking her tongue out at Kimmie and D.P. who stood in the Prompt Corner of the stage, facing her. Charles Grafton, pretending to pull at a non-existent beard, and showing a not-often-exhibited sense of humour, began to "truck on down", as he followed her on. He stopped this just before he reached the stage and the benevolent eye of Bingo Oliphant.

Bingo was enjoying himself. The class were doing splendidly, splendidly. Some of it was not, perhaps, arum in the, er, best traditions but—arum, nevertheless, splendid. Hockey-Marking's Gonzalo was absurd, of course, but Davidson's Miranda was good and Harradine's Caliban, Charles Grafton's Prospero, first rate. When they played it in costume, at the end of term, the parents would be very pleased, and perhaps a few critics might . . . After all, no one denied that Michael Dane was brilliant but, when it came to the Classics . . . not exactly arum-traditionally produced—but today, of course, critics considered that that was a good fault, freshness of attack and so on . . . Bingo smiled genially about him, but frowned when he discovered Enid Webster fast asleep in the row in front of him.

On stage Joan Davidson quoted: ". . . My father is hard at study; pray, now, rest yourself; He's safe for these three hours."

"The hell he is!" D.P. remarked quickly and audibly enough for Joan to hear her. The boy playing Ferdinand blushed, stuttered and began: "O most dear mistress—"

"Anybody's, if you ask me!" D.P. said, in a voice that Kimmie was certain the others could hear in the stalls.

Bingo looked puzzled, was someone prompting Ferdinand?

Ferdinand blushed more furiously and yammered on, Joan Davidson, with narrowed eyes, glared across at D.P., behind her. Charles Grafton hurriedly reached for his handkerchief and pretended to blow his nose while he laughed.

" . . . pray, give me that;
I'll carry it to the pile."

Joan announced.

"I knew she had piles!" D.P. said loudly.

"No, precious creature;—" Ferdinand stuttered.

"I had rather crack my sinews, break my back,
Than you should such dishonour undergo,
While I sit lazy by."

"Suits her!" D.P. said.

"Nix!" Kimmie urged, between great gurgles of laughter. "Bingo'll hear you."

"Who cares?"

"Besides," Kimmie added, "Charles speaks soon and he'll be livid."

"O.K." D.P. turned and walked to an old sofa which was pushed up to the wall. The bespectacled student electrician at the light board grinned as she passed.

"Barracking the Bard's strictly prohibited," he declared.

"Yes, but barracking Joan Davidson strictly approved," D.P. replied.

"She's pretty good," the boy defended.

"Even her best friends won't tell her," D.P. added.

"As Gonzalo, you smell, too!" the boy continued, with spirit.

"Of course, I'm playing cheese not ham," D.P. replied quickly.

"The part is Gonzalo not Gorgonzola," Kimmie corrected her, winking at the boy at the light switches.

D.P. sat wearily on the sofa which promptly gave way. The hoot of laughter that followed was heard in the auditorium, and Joan Davidson, who had observed the accident, stopped in the middle of "Miranda—O my . . . oh!" and then she laughed weakly, part rage, part enjoyment, to the astonishment of Bingo Oliphant and the rest, sitting on the stage whilst the tears ran down her face.

Michael Dane drove his battered V-8 Ford along Jermyn Street to pick up Kimmie to take her to Elstree.

He drove slowly, because he was early and he was sure she would not be ready. He frowned as he did so, thinking of his last visit to the courtyard. He had not told Kimmie that he had re-met Brenda Swift or that they had lunched since then. He did not know how to tell Kimmie or what to tell Kimmie. Brenda Swift was—an indiscretion, a phase, a back room girl, a momentary passion, a ship that passed in the night? He just could not be sure himself about her. She had nothing—and yet, as often happens, despite that, he found himself attracted. Kimmie was too young to understand. He was a fool in a way, he bitterly criticised himself. He should have admitted right away to Kimmie that he had retrieved Brenda's bag from the thief and that he had gone up to her flat for a nightcap. Now, since they had met for lunch, and he had still not said anything, the engagement became furtive, clandestine. It worried him because he could not be sure in his mind that Kimmie would understand. To be truthful to himself, he was not sure that he completely understood his own motives. Why had he lunched with Brenda? To try and find out why she was attractive. To see her in the clear light of day. To try to discover why he had gone up at her challenge for a noggin. To prove that she had no spell whatsoever. That she was just an attractive young person, sophisticated, hard, tough, and a complete antithesis to Kimmie. Kimmie, radiant,

young, lovely person, innocent and intensely loving because there had been nobody else, was all that Brenda was not. Was that not enough for a man? *Why* had he accepted her challenge? What had she got for him? He lunched with her to try to find that out. But he came away from the engagement as baffled as he had been when he walked home in the dawn after he had accepted her challenge . . . she had been frank; there was a mystery man at the back of the expensive apartment, the mink coat, the diamond ring. That great oaf who was with her at the Ballet, perhaps? She was the sort of person who would inevitably have a rich man in tow. That was *her*: that was her kind of life. That was not his, in any way. He was a contradiction anyway, an important member of a profession which, in matters of intimacy, had a reputation for generosity, he was from the rugger fifteen, team-spirit 'cheer-ho chaps!' atmosphere of the R.A.F. He was playing field and she was indirect lighting, boudoir style. Attraction by contrast? But he and Kimmie . . . ?

That was the thing. He felt he loved Kimmie, in a rather paternal way, he had to confess to himself. That is, she was the sort of person you wanted to protect. She was young and fresh—the sort of girl you married? Then what kind of a ménage did he expect to set up? What *was* this? Something after the style of the popular conception of the average Frenchman? That was not Michael Dane. That was not what he had in mind at all when he settled on the old matrimonial stakes, *if* he settled on the old matrimonial stakes, *if*, when, perhaps . . . He was confused. He, a clear-thinking, rational sort of cove who, ordinarily, knew where he was going—and how!—now he found himself slap in the middle of Hampton Court maze. Brenda Swift was attractive, in a sophisticated way. But he had seen and summed-up hundreds of Brenda Swifts, during his time in the Theatre. They did not mean a thing. Yet, here was a woman who had 'nothing on the ball' with regard to intellect, and he found that he liked her conversation. She admitted everything. It was because she was outrageously frank and slightly amused at herself, that he liked her. She gave him the impression of jumping outside herself and mentally joining him, saying to him, without the least sign of embarrassment or contriteness: 'well, that's me. Mentally I'm a complete dope. Physically I'm fun, of course. But there is nothing there, really. I mean, I'm me, Brenda Swift. Yes; my hair's real, and I've quite a torso, but what else have I got? I'm an ignorant nobody but I mustn't forget my sense of humour. A sense of humour at all times!' Which was the reason for her "Cave man!" at the Ballet, of course.

Yes, Michael repeated to himself, what has she got for me? Why do I want to lunch with her again? It made him irritable, because he knew that he was very weak. It was with a funny feeling, something akin to what the Desert Air Force boys called 'gypsy tummy', that he realised, in some consternation, that she was his Delilah. As he swung the car round into Armynter Court, he smiled cynically, the joke, of course, being that she would not know who Delilah was, if he asked.

Correction, please! She would, you know. She'd know Delilah as a character in a somewhat bawdy lyric about Samson.

Michael drove the car up to the lamp post and parked it, under the watchful eyes of Priscilla at the greengrocer's, Min in the Milk Bar, Maxie in the cigarette-haircutting kiosk and, of course, Rory Malone who, hearing the car engine, turned from his picture of the obedient little Mrs. Starling to look out of the window. He glared hatefully down at Michael Dane. That, double-crossing bastard Dane! Which would it be today, Kimmie or the tart in the Mansions? He threw down his palette and startled the mouse-like Mrs. Starling.

"Whatever is the matter, Mr. Malone?"

"I can't paint. I'm not in the mood to paint."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Have you a headache? Would you like an aspirin?"

"No. Not now, Mrs. Starling. Come back this afternoon."

"I can't this af—"

"Oh, all right. Good-bye, good-bye!"

He sat heavily on the bed, the springs creaked, protestingly. Every time he tried to concentrate, something happened to throw him. Here he was painting Mrs. Starling, getting on with something, keeping his mind busy since the week-end was round again, keeping calm inside and then—*oh, what was the use?* He heard Michael bounding up the stairs.

Kimmie was ready. Her suitcase packed. She ran happily towards Michael and they kissed.

"Good morning, darling!" she said. She rested in his arms and he kissed her forehead.

"It's going to be a wonderful week-end," she said simply. He knew that he would not have the heart to tell her about Brenda Swift. Now, too, being with Kimmie, Brenda suddenly became, in the right perspective, unimportant.

Michael picked up her suitcase and took her arm.

"We're on our way!"

They marched happily down to the car where the Terry twins had, at last, buried their enmity with the Casardi boys, in the excitement of sharing in the joys of a jet-propelled tank—Michael's old V-8 Ford—in which they were having the time of their lives, shouting, tooting the hooter, making "machine gun" noises, and generally defying the neighbourhood. Weak-minded Arthur came running towards the car, half-frightened by their yells and then emitting blood-curdling yells himself . . . Cowboys and Indians . . . scalps . . . games . . . Cowboys . . .

Mr. Casardi, furious at the behaviour of his offspring, came out of his café and also shouted. The noise was distressing, disturbing. It woke the sleepy Delilah in Armynter Court Mansions from a pleasant slumber. In a fury she rushed to the back window of the flat, her hair down, no slippers on her feet, her silken nightdress off one shoulder. She leaned out of the window, to give the kids a piece of her mind, just in time to see Michael Dane driving the fair-headed girl, Kimmie Blaxland, away in an old open car. She noted the suitcase in the back.

The children and the weak-minded man and Mr. Casardi were smiling. A final cheer sped the car on its way. There was peace again in the courtyard. Brenda Swift padded thoughtfully back to her bed. "H'm!" she observed to her pale-green pillow.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MICHAEL drove slowly to Elstree while the rest of the motoring world whizzed past them in their mad rush to get nowhere fast.

"It pleases me," Kimmie said, snuggling up to him, "to think that you could pass most of these road hogs if you wanted to."

"This old car—Freddie is his name—is a grand old 'bus. In the old days when I thought it mattered I spent all I had, and more, on getting him."

"—I thought ships or things were 'she's'."

"This one's a him and his name is still Freddie. Don't interrupt Miss Blaxland!" Michael reproved. Kimmie wrinkled up her nose at him and thought 'Miss Blaxland! How much nicer Mrs. Dane sounds! At any rate, to my ears.' She asked:

"Why did you think having a big car mattered?"

"I wanted to impress the Theatre magnates. People are always saying 'you must be seen at the best places', and all that—so I bought Freddie."

"And?"

"And the Theatre magnates couldn't care less!"

"Which proves?"

"I don't know. I know that once you *are* big enough, you do as you dam' well please!"

"H'm. I'll remember," Kimmie told him. She added:

"I'll have to introduce your Freddie to my Mr. Dobson."

"Good heavens, have I a rival?"

"Of course—and I love him very dearly."

"What is he—a tricycle?"

"No. Mr. Dobson's the most wonderful pony in the world!"

"How exciting. May I ride him?"

"Oh, no—you'd break his back. Mr. Dobson lives in retirement now."

"In the garden?"

"In a nearby field. You'll adore him and we'll show him to Freddie—the old and the new."

"The old and the old!" Michael corrected her.

"I meant the machine age and the horse age. Do you say horse age or carriage age?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Dear old Mr. Dobson, he's seen some sights in his days."

"So has my Freddie. We once had an incendiary plonk in the dickey."

"Heavens! What did you do, run a mile?"

"Fished it out with thumping heart, expecting the tank to go up any minute!"

"Did you keep Freddie going when you were Raffing?"

"Rather. We'd come hopping up from Hunsdon and whooped it up at Hatchetts—it was fun," Michael added wistfully.

"I wish I'd been there," Kimmie said.

"We usually went stag—then went on to the Suivi," Michael said, "Bader and his crowd often went there, too—it was, somehow, the contrast which was so wonderful—we needed the change of environment, I suppose."

"I wish I'd been along," she repeated.

"You are a funny child!"

"Don't call me a child, Michael," she said firmly. She thought 'I couldn't possibly tell him, but it would have been marvellous, sitting there at his side, with his pilot friends about him, sitting there, watching the others dance, drinking beer with him, comradeship, that was the word he had used, "comradeship" . . . sitting there in my gold and old rose evening dress, and the fighter boys tired-eyed, lazily happy, watching the dancers and Michael suddenly suggesting "Shall we dance?" and dancing with Michael with the world knowing that that is Michael Dane's fiancée. The—'

"You're suddenly very pensive!"

"Did you drink beer at Hatchetts or the Suivi?"

"Nothing so common. We started on beer at a little pub—"

"Oh, don't spoil it all! You weren't tight all the time you were on the ground?"

"Good heavens, no!" Michael laughed. "But you'd be astonished at our capacity—we all carried extra fuel tanks, which we never jettisoned!"

"I don't understand that."

"Never mind, not important, not very funny. A Raf joke," he explained.

"Grand chaps—grand times!" he added.

"And when you went to the *Painted Bell*? You said you sometimes went to the *Painted Bell*?" Kimmie reminded him.

"You do remember things, don't you?"

"Yes."

"That's when, suddenly, after all the noise, and then never being alone, and the rush to get in the air, and the tempo becoming white hot—then, sometimes, it was nice to sip coffee alone in the *Painted Bell* . . ." Michael explained. Kimmie's eyes lit up as if within something danced.

"What's the matter? Does that sound frightfully funny?" he asked. She smiled serenely at him.

"Oh, no. Not that. No, I'm just—happy," she said, but she knew in his explanation that there was *hope* for her.

When they reached the crossroads at Elstree and she gave Michael directions for finding the house she said:

"We'll be there in a moment—please try and be polite about the water butt."

"What's the matter with it?"

"Luff's been painting it."

"Well, that's all right."

"Is it? You wait till you see it. Here we are—the bungalow on the left—the famous Belly Acres."

Michael pulled up outside the Gables and tooted gently on the hooter so that the Blaxlands should hear them.

Diddy Blaxland came running out, jelling as she ran, good-natured, fond, tweedy: "Hallo! Hallo!" she greeted them.

Luff followed, holding a fountain pen in his hand, as if he had broken off in the throes of composition.

"Hurrah, you've brought Mr. Dane!"

"Where's Mary?" Luff enquired. Kimmie looked apprehensively at Michael.

"Actually—" Kimmie began but Michael took over:

"D.P. Hockey-Marking has a cold, Mrs. Blaxland," Michael replied. "At least that's what I've been told. I personally think she is being tactful!"

Kimmie glanced quickly at her mother. Diddy nodded and smiled knowingly at Michael.

"Very sensible of Mary, I'm sure. Though, she's a sweet girl and she keeps an eye on my Kimmie and—" she burbled on, pleasantly and without pause for breath, whilst Michael took the suitcases into the house and Luff followed happily in the rear, arm-in-arm with his daughter.

The lunch which followed was simple, but the happiness that spread around the table was splendid. Michael realised that the Blaxlands had found the secret of enjoyment, even if they had very little of the material things of this world. Luff's work was, apparently, something of a family joke, nor did he mind this:

"What are you working on now Mr. Blaxland?" Michael enquired.

"You've just missed my big Christmas splash," Luff told him. "I spend all the month of August doing my Christmas work. You can't imagine how beastly it is thinking up festive fun for Xmas in midsummer but it's to do with block-makers and printers and distribution and—"

"Darling," Kimmie reminded him, "Michael wanted to know what you're working on now."

"All in good time, Mr. Dane will be here till Monday morning—"

"Sunday night," Kimmie corrected him. She wanted to make the week-end perfect by driving back with Michael on Sunday, so that they could be alone together Sunday night in town.

"Well, at any rate, for the next half an hour and—"

"If you're going to talk for half an hour, I'm going to put the kettle on and make an after-lunch cup of tea," his wife interjected.

"As I was saying, Mr. Dane, before my family rudely interrupted, I am now writing a serial for a paper of whose existence I doubt very much if you are aware."

"If it's the *Gem* or the *B.O.P.*, I must confess I always——"

"No. This is a periodical with the enchanting title of *Lotsa Action*."

"You are the Editor, Mr. Blaxland?"

"I am a humble contributor."

"Not so humble, Daddy, and Michael, you must call Daddy 'Luff', or he'll be angry."

"Stop interrupting your father and I shall do nothing of the kind," Michael light-heartedly reproved Kimmie and then turned back to Luff.

"My contribution is, naturally, a high-speed story in twenty parts starring that intrepid hero John Carslake. John—he's six foot tall, has blue eyes and fair hair, like my Kimmie, wide shoulders tapering to a small waist, a straight right like the kick of a mule and, at the moment, I've got him bound and gagged, captured by the men of Mars!" Luff explained with dramatic relish.

"Great scot! How is he going to escape?" Michael enquired.

Luff shrugged his shoulders.

"I haven't the faintest idea. I was just at the point of thrusting a gag in his mouth—in *Lotsa Action* gags are always *thrust*, never placed, you understand?"

"Perfectly Mr. Blaxland, but don't you work out John's adventures before you write them?"

"Oh, yes. I know roughly what's going to happen but half my enjoyment is trying to keep John in the story I've evolved for him. For example, I had no idea he was going to be captured by the Men of Mars. It's deucedly awkward—he's due at the Princess of the Moon's Palace and the Princess is waiting for him!" Luff's eyes twinkled merrily.

"I take it, this is a rocket story?"

"Naturally. Jet propulsion to the moon, and all that."

"It sounds terribly exciting."

"It is!" Luff assured them.

"That's the trouble with my Luff—or rather perhaps that's his good point, he really believes it!" Diddy informed Michael as she returned to the bungalow dining room having put the kettle on. Kimmie promptly got up and began to take the dirty plates out. The atmosphere was 'homey', informal, very soothing. Michael thought 'I must never hurt these people. They are so kind and so ingenuous and they adore Kimmie. So do I. I adore little Kimmie and I mustn't hurt her, either!'

Later in the afternoon they walked down the hill to visit Mr. Dobson, leaving Freddie, Michael's car, behind. ("Their friendship could only be platonic!" Michael had observed and suggested "Do us good to walk.") Kimmie had changed into a print dress. She looked cool and tremendously happy. 'I must never hurt these people'. How was he casually to mention that he had seen Brenda Swift? They walked in silence, listening to the magical mixture of summer drone—of bees,

and birds and lawn mowers and a spirit which went back through the centuries to make an English summer.

Mr. Dobson, slightly formal in front of Michael, soon became less frigid after Kimmie had whispered into his long ear that Michael was a friend. 'One of the family' she had informed Mr. Dobson, but that particular whisper was said in the smallest of whispers and only Mr. Dobson heard it.

"It's the devil trying to save lump sugar for Mr. Dobson," Kimmie told Michael.

"I hadn't thought of that! Think of all the horses all over England bitterly resenting the war on account of no lump sugar."

"Our grocer's a lamb. He saved me it as long as he could but it became very difficult. If ever I received a lump in a restaurant instead of a spoonful—"

"Or a saccharine tablet!"

"Or a saccharine tablet, I saved it for Mr. Dobson."

"Why Mr. Dobson?"

"Why not? He's a most dignified little fellow—not all buckled and dusty and casual, like your Freddie!"

"You got me, pal!" Michael replied, gangster-fashion, out of the corner of his mouth.

"That was unlike you, somehow, Michael," Kimmie said, in surprise. "Shall we sit in the shade for a bit?"

"Yes. On that log over there."

"Mr. Dobson likes to scratch his neck on it. We'll have to move if he does."

"Of course. This is his domain and we his humble subjects," Michael said.

"Quite right. Daddy's best story was about Mr. Dobson."

"Yes?"

"Yes. He had a wonderful letter from the Editor—"

"Of *Lotsa Action*, I bet he's a character! I—"

"No, it was not *Lotsa Action*—it was for the tiny children, I can't remember if it was *Tiger Tim's Weekly* or *Bertie Bruin's Best*—but, at any rate—"

"But at any rate, I find you quite enchanting, darling!" he said. She turned and looked up at him, as if she were capable of reading his innermost thoughts. She said:

"That's more like you, Michael."

"Didn't you like my gangster imitation?"

"I said it wasn't like you. I meant it was too—too flip," she explained.

"Don't you think we often behave in a manner that is sometimes unlike us?"

"I don't think so."

"I do. I often surprise myself."

"How? I don't understand?"

"Well, one does things that you feel are not you." He tried to explain.

She was puzzled.

"I still don't understand."

"Then skip it," Michael replied. Mr. Dobson wandered slowly over and joined them in the shade.

"Do you think he wants to scratch his neck?"

"He might," Kimmie replied. "We'd better move on to the grass."

"Always willing to oblige. In any case, I haven't sat on the grass since—oh, way back!"

"When? At Dowager Lady Whoosit's week-end party at Little-trousers-on-Splash?"

"No. At Hunsdon, between tallies."

"What's that mean?"

"Between air raid alerts."

"Oh!"

"Sitting on the grass by Control, waiting for the Tannoy's 'Scramble!' All so peaceful and serene and so definitely secure. We never could believe England could be taken"

"Maybe that's why you were so good!"

"Now, now, no line shoot!"

"Of course not. In any case I meant the Raf, not you, you egotistical Mr. Dane."

"You engaging Miss Blaxland!"

Her face lit up, like the sun emerging from a cloud, then, suddenly, it clouded again.

"What's the matter?"

For a brief moment she had thought he was proposing; 'The engaging Miss Blaxland'. Engaging: it was a pity he had used that word. As they walked back slowly for tea, she told him that she would miss him terribly when he went to Manchester for the try-out of his new show.

"I'll ring you," he assured her. "Two weeks isn't so very long, darling."

"But how? I'm not on the 'phone."

"At D.P.'s or your pub? We'll arrange something," he said, squeezing her arm.

They talked of Banderton's and he told her a new Ballet Mistress was expected, a Russian who was considered very good; then, unexpectedly, disconcertingly, in the sunlight, he added:

"I say, Kim, remember that girl at the Ballet—the one who lives near you in the Mansions?"

A great fear clutched at her heart.

"Yes?" she said.

"I've—I've seen her once or twice. She's rather fun."

"Oh," she said.

That was all, but, within her, her heart felt as if it were lead.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BRENDA SWIFT lay in her bath and contemplated her toes. Her hair was encased in a large pale-green silk bandeau. Periodically she let her toes rise from the water and, as she did so, the frown on her face deepened. Her toes coming up from the water were like the thoughts she had that swam around underneath the surface of her mind awaiting formulation before bobbing to the clear. It was two in the morning and she had rowed with Ralph Checker again, and he had gone off home in disgruntled mood. It was getting monotonous, this rowing with Ralph. It had all happened because a rather good-looking man at the Club Cabana had flirted openly with her. She and Ralph had had one of his business associates' dinners at the Barchester, at which she was displayed before a group of slightly stupid, definitely rapacious old bores who should have known better. They gave the impression that they would rather have eaten her than the Barchester set dinner. They were all associates of, or bound up with Ralph's infernal butter scotch and he had asked her to "be nice". O.K. she had been nice; she even danced with them in turn and pretended to be surprised when each one made innuendoes which, from young men would have been compliments. Why on earth Ralph had not let her ring up Judy Gwendolyn to help share the splay feet, Brenda could not imagine. The dinner was followed by liqueurs and coffee and more dancing, and it did not break up until eleven. Brenda thought it would never end. She suddenly realised how useless her life was, entertaining business acquaintances of Ralph's, listening to the platitudes, never having any real fun, never really living, back street girl, never being able to plan . . . Yes but whose fault was it, duckie? Who wanted comfort; who left Long Acre; fish and chips on Tuesday; Non-stop at the Frivolity; the nice boy Norman in the Navy who wanted to marry her ("A little house in Coulsdon and two children, Brenda sweet")? Little Brenda Swift, her wee self! Well, lambie-pie, you got what you wanted—a flat in Armynter Court Mansions, a rich business man and all the trimmings. Little gal what now? Then, just as suddenly, you were disgruntled. You didn't want all that at all. Well, what the hell did you want?

They had gone on to the Club Cabana after the Barchester because Brenda had said "It seems ages since we dined—I'm starving." So Ralph had suggested the Club Cabana where you could get a swell dish of chop suey. Ralph considered it cosmopolitan to eat chop suey. It showed he'd been around. She wanted eggs and bacon. The Club Cabana had eggs and bacon, for which you paid plenty. After the eggs and bacon and some coffee, she felt better. It was then that she noticed the tall, fair boy dancing with a well-known Operator, Mrs. Eyot-Marcy. Now Brenda did not mind what Mrs. Marcy did. Mrs. Marcy ran her own life, her own way. If Mrs. Marcy (her husband was

rumoured killed at Tobruk) wanted to take rich visitors for a ride, it was Mrs. Marcy's concern, not Brenda Swift's—and Brenda did not care, either way. But some of the girls, like Judy Gwendolyn, thought Mrs. Eyot-Marcy's profession, to quote Judy, "*très lousé*". Mrs. Eyot-Marcy sought 'em out, the rich visitors, fleeced 'em and left 'em slightly opened mouthed; and certainly nettled and angry with the cool, so charming, so ingenuous British. Mrs. Eyot-Marcy's young man tonight, unfortunately, wore the uniform of the United States Army—and, remembering Bart, Brenda's Invasion Colonel, Ralph Checker was not amused. Mrs. Eyot-Marcy was not amused, either. Nor was the fact that the Colonel was slightly pixilated an excuse that Ralph or Mrs. Eyot-Marcy seemed agreeable of accepting. Ralph did not like Yankee Colonel's calling out "Hi, yah, Red?" to his girl. Funny in a way, because Ralph did not mind his butter scotch boys leering at her or telling her bawdy stories or dancing with her, but handsome young Americans . . . It probably would not have mattered if Ralph had not followed Bart in her affections.

It was then, as Ralph nagged at her not to look at the young man, and her mind really was way past the Colonel and back in her own flat, late at night, pouring out a drink for the vital, compact, atomic young man who had chased Dad away, that she suddenly realised what she was lacking in life. It was not a purpose. No, not that. She very much doubted if she had a purpose in life. She did not need a purpose, but she could *improve* herself. She had no *culture*. Why should she worry about that? She knew, in her mind, that she was sick of Ralph and would be leaving him as soon as she decided where and how and with whom but, ever since, she supposed, in thinking back to the episode, ever since she and Judy and Strawberry and Fergie had made such fools of themselves at the Ballet and the terse-faced, intense, dynamic stranger behind them had chipped in with a command to them to behave, she had felt she needed culture.

My heavens, but Ma and, more particularly, gaol-bird Dad would have laughed scornfully at that. "'Ark at 'er! Only a few years ago she was taking her clothes off in Non-Stop!' But, when she met the young man again, and she challenged him, and he came up to the flat for a drink and he talked of things that meant really nothing to her—music, the Theatre, Ballet, paintings (she had a reproduction by Van Gogh on one wall but had not known and now did not know if that was good, bad or tremendous)—she realised that what was missing was education—not all the old stuff, maths, spelling and all that—but, well, damn it, *culture* was the word. He had talked—quickly, skipping from one subject to another, like flipping the pages of a book, pausing to read a line or two, and always the line that mattered—and it was interesting. And something was swimming under the sea of her mind, waiting to form and bob up. But at the moment, there was the present and she had challenged him . . .

Another odd thing was that whereas Michael Dane, with his aliveness, his energy, his drive, his magnetism, made her realise her defects,

that she *had* these defects did not bother him. One would have thought that he would have despised her because of these things that were lacking. Why did he like her? Because she was sophisticated, worldly? Because she laughed a lot? Because he was rather inexperienced for so challenging a man? (and that because of the little actress down at the other end of the Court?) What was it? She who had never been on a string before, found herself falling for someone whose talk, mental outlook, whose whole being, had no future for her. One simply could not live *with* a person like that, he did not seem to bother much about money and material things. One could gain nothing out of an *affaire* except this awful feeling of being on a string (I've never been on a string. I, Brenda Smith—er—Swift—have never been on a string and now I want to *see* that man so badly it hurts!) What did *he* see in the little actress? Everything, of course. All the things that counted. O.K. O.K.! That was all right. I don't want to beg, borrow or steal him . . . but . . . He had stimulated an urge within me to better myself. That was the truth. He had uncovered an inferiority complex in me—me, a person who always knew my worth . . . Well, so you go to high school and learn all about these things—and what? You oust Mrs. Eyot-Marcy and become a rather fashionable hostess—you take the higher members of Legations for a ride? What's the purpose of this culture bug?

That she did not know. It had no purpose in that *she* had no purpose. It was an idea. It was *the* idea that had suddenly plopped up to the surface. The Ralph Checkers and all that, had to go. Well, she knew that Ralph was "through", before Michael came along. Would she have felt differently if there had been no Michael Dane? Somehow, was this feeling of illiteracy bound up with Michael? Yes—No! there was no future in being with Michael, not *her* kind of future. . . . Not, not if she acquired the things that he had? No, because he did not want them in her. And then, as if the ripples round the object which had plopped, stopped, she realised that she had never really had friendship, real friendship and that was what she wanted. Culture? Phooey to culture! She didn't care a dam' about culture—not really—not deep down inside. No, it was friendship—the desire for real friendship was what she craved. It was because he ignored all the things that she lacked that she was bound to him, needed him. He had given her friendship, others had given her money and jewellery and promises. He was a friend. She thought back and could not ever remember having one. It was a staggering thought. In her mind the thing that plopped up took her back to St. Hilda's when she was at school. She had a friend then. A little girl called Bunty. She and Bunty were friends, but Bunty went her way and was now, no doubt, married and had kids. They had gone their ways—the Judy Gwendolyns of today were not friends—like Bunty had been a friend. It was in the classroom at St. Hilda's, she and Bunty, they were being taught all about King Arthur and Excalibur. She remembered vividly the sword being held up by a hand in the lake for Arthur to take. Now, in her mind, the object which

had plopped up from the currents of her mind, was a hand—the hand of friendship. Michael's hand! And—

"If you stare at that soldier any more—encouraging him like that—" Ralph Checker said, in a furious voice, bringing her back with a bump to the Club Cabana,—"I'm going to walk out."

Brenda looked at him in surprise. She had been smiling, of course. Smiling at her thoughts, she hadn't even *seen* the lanky Colonel, she could see him now, with his ginny grin. She turned and looked at Ralph. It never rains but it pours.

"Oh, no—" she said quickly, a little afraid he might get up first.

"—*I'm* going to walk out." She pulled her wrap about her shoulders. She stood up and looked down at his astonished face. "Thanks, Ralph. It's over, now." She walked a pace or two away from the table, turned and came back. She just could not help returning to him one of his pet expressions, "Every cloud has a silver lining, you know!" she said. She was laughing when the commissionaire got her a taxi. She was still smiling when she reached Armynter Court Mansions.

Free! That magic word. Free to seek out . . . *friendship*. She decided to have a nice hot bath.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

EUSTACE HARRADINE stood at the corner by the Banderton, awaiting Kimmie Blaxland. Dead Pan Hockey-Marking had arrived and so, too, had Charles Grafton. It was only a short walk to the Academy from the corner, but Eustace, rain or shine, Michael Dane or no, still liked to show he was still loyal. As he waited, enjoying the morning sun on his back, he visualised himself having breakfast in his California home—a hacienda with a patio and a private swimming pool—a few miles from the studios—at Santa Monica, or Malibu, perhaps. The hot California sun beat on to his tanned back. He was breakfasting on, let's see, sliced peaches and cream, fried eggs, bacon and kidneys, Chase and Sanborn coffee, orange juice, of course, and toast and marmalade. His manservant—someone like Rochester? Or a Chinese? No, a Filipino, that was better casting, perhaps—his manservant brought in the papers with the reviews of his latest picture. The entire Press were eulogistic, of course. Another superb characterisation by Eustace Harradine (or would it be 'Harradine', without the Eustace, like Garbo or Barrymore?) It was a pity, he mused, that the name did not roll off the tongue now, with 'the' in front of it—'the Harradine' just did not seem to jell nicely. A pity. H'm, well, "Eustace Harradine another Chaney", "Charles Laughton has a new rival". Yes, that sounded all right. Of course, he had only succumbed to Hollywood because of financial reasons. He was wowing them on Broadway in a series of astonishing characterisations (Caliban, Mr. Squeers, Richard the Second, Sir Toby Belch, Falstaff and so on), when—when

what? His motives for going to Hollywood must be of the very highest order. Let's see. Ah, yes? His poor old mother, an immediate operation. An iron lung. A trip to Hawaii. Colossal expense. The two or three hundred pounds a week, that is, the Grand he was making in New York simply wasn't enough to defray all expenses. He simply had to take R-K-O's offer. Well, it was in a good cause, and—

"Hey!"

Eustace jumped and came back to earth.

"Gosh! You startled me."

Harry Barlow had come up to him and laid a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Old Man. I say, you certainly did jump!" Harry observed.

"Well, I was miles away and—" Eustace began.

"Where were you? Tearing the house down at the Moscow Arts Theatre?" Harry cheerfully asked.

"We are not amused," Eustace replied.

Harry grinned at him and said:

"If you let your hair grow any longer, Eustace, Benson Banderton'll present you with a violin case!"

"And if you wear those loud pullovers, he'll probably hand *you* a saxophone!" Eustace snapped back.

"*Touché. Touché.*" Harry bowed and then turned to look down Bow Street.

"No Kimmie yet?"

"Not yet."

"Well, we might see some more of her the next few weeks," Harry ventured, still looking down the street. Eustace gave him a sharp glance. It was the first reference that had been made about . . .

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, a certain person's taking a new play on a try-out to Manchester and—"

"There's no need to be mysterious. If you mean Michael Dane, say Michael Dane," Eustace said.

"All right, keep your underwear on! I do mean Michael Dane, and I do mean if he goes North we might see something of Kimmie in the evenings."

"What Kimmie does in the evenings is her business," Eustace defended.

"I know it is, but you know as well as I do that—"

"Oh, never mind. I don't want to hear about it."

"Well, you'd better. It's time you faced facts and—"

"You keep out of this, Harry Barlow!" Eustace warned him, looking incongruous as he tried to appear aggressive.

"All I said was—"

"I don't want to discuss it."

"But—"

"I don't want to discuss it!"

"Oh, you're crazy!" Angrily Harry stamped away along Broad Court. Eustace continued to mount guard for Kimmie who now appeared round the corner of Russell Street and hurried up Bow Street towards him.

She waved and he felt a warm glow within. No matter what the others said, she looked to him, she needed him, he was dependable, and there would come a time when her infatuation for Michael Dane would be over and she would know to whom to turn—ever faithful Eustace felt that this alleviated the bitterness in his heart over Michael Dane—Dane would be positively middle-aged in a year or two—he had no right to fall for Kimmie. It wasn't Kimmie's fault, she knew nothing of the affairs of the world. Lovely Kimmie! He could see them holding a little *soirée* (American papers he purchased from the bookstalls off Leicester Square always referred to "*soirees*") with the leading lights of Europe paying homage to them—why, they could be England's answer to the Lunts! Yes, he must be patient. Her adolescent "crush" for Dane would not last for ever. In fact, once he went North to try out his new show . . . he realised that perhaps Harry Barlow was right in what he said, there would be a chance to see more of Kimmie again. He jutted out his jaw (but looked no more belligerent); but Harry Barlow had no right to talk about Kimmie as if she were 'just another dame'. Well, even if he had not quite done that, at least he should have more respect for their mutual admiration of her, or, at any rate, he should have realised that, when Michael Dane went North, naturally it would be to him that Kimmie would turn.

"Hallo, Eustace! Am I fearfully late?" Kimmie greeted him, a little out of breath.

"You're late, all right."

"Yet you still waited? You angel!"

Oh, it was worth it; it was all worth while. "You angel!" she had said.

"We will go up and apologise to Papa Banderton after prayers together," he said lightly, but, inside, he was as solemn as if they were going to walk up the aisle to Vicar Banderton!

They hurried into the academy together.

Michael sought Kimmie out in the tea break; it was fortunate that Charles Grafton had to join the fencing class, for Harry and Eustace had agreed to go to the gymnasium to watch him. Charles had suggested that, since the gym was empty during the tea break, they could use the foils and guards and "have a go". This they were most anxious to do, and so, deserting the two girls, they had even forgone their "elevenesses", in order to spend ten hilarious minutes throwing down gauntlets as challenges and thrusting and parrying in a most zealous but inexperienced manner. Kimmie and Dead Pan would have joined them, but D.P. refused to give up her morning "cuppa" and ginger cake.

Kimmie was pleased because she did not want to be 'raucous'. She was unhappy at Michael's intended departure and worried about the

woman from Armynter Court Mansions. She wanted to tell D.P. but was not sure just how much of a menace the Mannequin type was. If she could be sure . . . it was all rather ominous and very depressing. At this moment Michael, carrying his mug of tea, as youthful as most of the students, with complete lack of affectation, moved past the 'co-eds', pausing here and there to have a word with a group, finally reached Kimmie and D.P. who were giving a very good imitation of unconcern. Out of the corner of her eye, D.P. could see Joan Davidson, followed timidly by the sheep-like Enid Webster, forcing a way past the students round the tea urn, in order to get near Michael.

"Hallo, you two—where are the rest of the F.F.?" Michael greeted them.

"I like the F.F.—sounds as if we're the Resistance Movement!" D.P. replied.

"Well, aren't you?"

"Of course."

Michael turned to Kimmie and lowered his voice, he talked quickly because he, too, had seen the designing Joan Davidson approaching.

"I came to say good-bye, Kim," he said.

"But—Michael, I thought you weren't going till tomorrow?" Kimmie stammered.

"So did I. Change of plan. The entire company is going up this afternoon."

"This afternoon!"

"Yes—"

"Oh!"

"It is rather sudden—but probably better that way," Michael said.

"Can't we lunch?" Kimmie asked him.

"No, dear. I'm catching the One-five."

"Oh!"

D.P. turned away and talked to a girl near her in order that Kimmie and Michael could talk without being overheard.

"Better this way," Michael repeated. Kimmie nodded. Her blue, blue eyes were filled with tears.

"Only two weeks. I'll be ringing you."

"Tonight?"

"Promise. I'll ring the *Duke's Arms*—nine-thirty sharp."

"But, if you're rehearsing . . . ?"

"We won't be tonight—don't get there till six o'clock." He noted that she was very near tears.

"Cheer up, darling," he whispered.

Kimmie nodded. Dead Pan, Cerberus-like, watched the approach of Joan Davidson, breaking off her conversation with the other students in order to call out in a loud voice (as a warning to Michael and Kimmie of her approach) "Hallo, Miranda!"

Joan Davidson sniffed: "I forgive your appalling manners because of the laugh you gave me when the sofa collapsed—that really was frightfully funny."

"You've got to get used to barracking, you know. Hasn't she, Mr. Dane?" D.P. turned to Michael.

"That's a leading question and a most unfair one," Michael replied, evasively. He nodded genially at Joan and Enid Webster. "Hallo!" he said.

"Oh, Mr. Dane—" Joan gushed, but D.P. interrupted with studied casualness.

"But I think we ought to have it in the curriculum."

"Have what in the curriculum?" Joan asked, angrily.

"A barrack class."

"What *are* you burbling about?"

"We ought to play an act through with cat-calls and interruptions and all that, so that we learn to keep our *savoir-faire* or something—so that, in case we ever—"

"Oh, you do talk rubbish!" Joan Davidson dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand.

"You mean a rehearsal—like training the horses for a Royal visit, D.P.?" Kimmie asked, after blowing her nose rather violently.

"Yes, that's it. Lots of shouting and cheers and things waving," D.P. suggested. She winked at Kimmie, continuing: "Then, if any of us ever get the bird, we—"

Joan Davidson was attempting to talk to Michael. She asked: "I hear that Phyllida Bentley-Goddard's playing the lead in your new show, do you think . . . ?"

"And, furthermore," D.P. panzered on, "we could all wear fencing guards and the other students could pelt us with rotten eggs and—"

"I mean, is she experienced enough—?" Joan Davidson talked louder and moved nearer to Michael.

"I can't hear you, I'm afraid," he said, apologetically, with a side glance at D.P. In desperation, Joan losing her temper snapped:

"Oh, do shut up, Hockey-Marking!"

"Sorry!" D.P. apologised, urbanely.

The buzzer stuttered angrily announcing the recommencement of work at the Banderton. ("We don't have bells," Mr. Benson Banderton explained to prospective pupils "Too much like school. This is an academy—a subtle distinction.")

Michael glanced at his watch.

"I say!" he exclaimed, "I must be hopping."

"We've got to go, too," D.P. added quickly.

"Oh, but—aren't you taking us in . . . ?" Joan Davidson began.

"Mr. Oliphant's substituting, I believe," Michael replied. He turned to Kimmie: "I must fly. Enjoy yourselves." He turned again, his look encompassing them all, and he had moved away.

"Oh, I—!" Joan Davidson gasped. "Well, I didn't know he was going North *today*, did you?"

"Yes," Kimmie said.

"Of course!" added D.P. with superiority and scorn. Later, as they listened to Bingo Oliphant explaining that he was—arum—taking over

Mr. Dane's classes—er—arum—while his colleague was away, D.P. whispered to Kimmie: "It was better that way."

Kimmie nodded. Of course it was, but she wanted to howl like a baby.

When Michael, in company with Phyllida Bentley-Goddard and the other principals in the new show, had registered at their hotel in Manchester and agreed to meet for a drink before dinner in the cocktail bar, he asked the Reception Clerk to book his call to the *Duke's Arms* for nine-thirty and turned to go to the lifts, an attendant carrying his suitcase.

Seated in the lounge by the lifts was Brenda Swift.

"Hallo, Michael!" she said. "Surprise! Surprise!"

CHAPTER TWENTY - TWO

"All right," said Michael, "let's have the gory details."

He had washed and then joined Brenda in the lounge for a cocktail.

"No gory details, my sweet. I happen to be in Manchester—so I hoped we'd have fun."

"It's that 'happened to be in Manchester' that interests me!" he replied.

"Did you know your left eyebrow goes up when you are angry?" she said.

"Look here, Brenda Swift, what is this?"

"You don't seem at all pleased to see me."

"I'm here on a job."

"Of course you are—and I'm here on pleasure."

"Oh!"

"Why the 'oh'—you didn't really think I was here for any other reason?"

"Your frankness never fails to knock me for six. Then you followed me here?"

"Yes—but don't get too conceited. It happens that I have a few days on my little ownsome and—"

"You mean the boy friend's out of town!"

"How bright the man is tonight. Yes. And—"

"So you thought you'd trip up here for a few days for larks and capers with me, did you?"

"You *are* angry!"

"Naturally. I don't mix business with pleasure," Michael said, but he remembered his Thames boat trip with Kimmie downstream and realised that even he, with his principles and love of his work, was only human.

Brenda, replied, surprisingly, as if she were able to read his thoughts: "Even you are human, Michael Dane—I know that."

"Look here, Brenda Swift—what do you want of me?—and I don't want any nasty smart wisecracks," he warned her.

Brenda studied his angry face; two little clefts between his eyebrows deepened when he was annoyed, and, as she had told him, his left eyebrow went skywards provocatively. His face, razor-sharp, keen, was so intensively alive . . . what did she want of him? He would not believe her when she said friendship, because, when she said friendship she was not a hypocrite, she did not mean that it would be platonic. Platonic friendship was all right for the novelettes. She said:

"If I told you, you would either laugh or you wouldn't believe me."

"Would that matter to you?" He replied, cynically.

She nodded. "Yes," she said, "It would."

Now he looked searchingly at her. Was this strange, irritating mesh-making woman in love with him? What *had* he to offer to her? What had she to offer to him? Solace? He did not need solace; he was too self-dependent to want very much, except, of course, what every man wants eventually, roots. She was hardly a person who could give a man that; Kimmie, of course, could but . . . Kimmie! At the very thought of her he flushed guiltily. If ever she knew that Brenda Swift had travelled North to be with him. He felt cheap and melodramatic. Kimmie would call her an adventuress. Her Michael Dane tangled up with an adventuress. She would be so shamed. He felt abjectly miserable because he knew, too, that he would not tell Brenda to go to hell.

"What is clicking round so fast in that brain box?" she enquired. She sipped her cocktail as if the situation was a daily occurrence, one which she took in her stride. He said:

"I was wondering why I didn't tell you to go to hell."

"Because we're so different."

"Maybe."

"But I don't want it to end there, Michael."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want it to be furtive."

"Furtive"; what an odd word for her to choose.

"'Furtive'?" He repeated.

"You know what I mean."

He got up, seeing some of the company approaching.

"I don't, you know."

"I think you do. I *hope* you do," Brenda replied. She smiled faintly.

He knew who she would suit—it suddenly flashed to him as he looked down at her. The artist chap who lived in the flat below Kimmie at Armynter Court. Yes. That was it. What a pity he could not contrive a meeting. So that he and Kimmie could live happily ever after?

"You seem to be in a mess—mentally speaking," she observed.

"What do you know about such things?" he asked, sarcastically, taking his weakness out on her.

"What, indeed?" she admitted.

Phyllida Bentley-Goddard and two of the supporting cast joined them. Michael nodded in the direction of Brenda.

"May I introduce Miss Swift, Miss Bentley-Goddard, Miss Matty Mayfield, Mr. Reginald Harlow."

They exchanged "How-do-you-do's".

"Are you playing here?" Phyllida enquired. Michael thought 'Yes. She looks "actressy"'. I wonder how she'll parry that one. Pray God she isn't her usual frank self and says she has come up to be with me.'

"Oh, no," Brenda replied. "Just visiting. My people have property outside . . ."

She left it vague. Phyllida nodded, accepting it, appraising Brenda's check travelling suit, the expensive felt hat, the American brogues (a Yankee Brigadier among her entourage, perchance?) Phyllida approved; in fact, too much so, she turned to Michael and said:

"Darling, when are we going to eat, I'm starving!"

"Now, if you like," Michael said. They made a move towards the dining room. Mr. Reginald Harlow, who was playing Phyllida's father in the show and, therefore, should have known better, enquired courteously: "How about you, Miss Shift?"

"Swift—Brenda Swift." Michael corrected him.

"Silly old fool," thought Phyllida. 'Doesn't he realise we don't need the *soignée* Miss Swift!'

"I'm afraid I'd be awfully dumb," Brenda confessed, looking, with amusement in her eyes, at Michael, whose left eyebrow had risen once more. "I know nothing about the Stage." (And may God forgive me: it's more than likely that Mr. Harlow sat in the front row of the *Frivolty* and peered up at my nakedness when I was in *Non-Stop*!)

"Oh, that's all right—isn't it, Dane? We won't want to talk about shop all the time?" The bald-pated Reginald Harlow assured her.

"If I know Michael, we will!" Phyllida interjected. She thought: 'I believe her hair really is that colour'.

Brenda got to her feet.

"If you really, don't mind . . ."

"Of course not," said Miss Matty Mayfield, who had played stage maids so often, she practically only spoke when she was spoken to. "We'd love it." She looked round timidly and caught a glare from Phyllida, and coughed hurriedly.

"Let's go!" said Michael, angrily.

"Aren't you going home then tonight—I mean, your people's place . . .?" Phyllida asked, as they went in to dine.

"No, actually, they'll be 'in' tomorrow. Daddy's got some business here, you know" Brenda vaguely waved a hand, as if such concentration was beyond her. The *idea* of 'business' . . . Her 'actually' was splendid. It put Michael in a better mood. Damn it! The woman could have acted Phyllida off the stage!

"Then you're staying the night?" Phyllida asked.

"Yes," Brenda assured her, "I'm staying the night."

Later that evening, at the *Duke's Arms*, Mr. Flarf, the 'commercial', who had just returned from Manchester, after a successful business trip, was in jocular mood. Queenie laughed uproariously at every quip and even dusted off her perennial joke—for, when Maxie from the cigarette kiosk, ordered "Same again," she retorted: "Can't give you the same, give you something similar!" Whereupon she looked around at the assembly with an air of pride and achievement, and prompted Mr. Flarf to observe:

"That's the trouble here, Queenie—it's *all* so similar, you can't tell old'n'mild from a medium sherry!"

The others chuckled and Queenie observed to Mr. Brember "Isn't it awful with him?" And Mr. Brember, after clearing his throat, assured her that it was, indeed.

When Kimmie entered, followed by Dead Pan Hockey-Marking, the company was singing lustily ("Boisterous-like but refined" as Queenie said reflectively, later on), and Priscilla, who fancied her vocal ability, rode the storm superbly, in a voice, loud and untrained, and undismayed at Mr. Brember's monotone or Kid Cato's vague attempts to "swing it". There were mild cheers and a few glasses were tapped on the table. Mr. Flarf, who suggested the songs but, of course, did not join in, said:

"Magnificent. If I were standing outside I would have thought it was the Retreat of the Conservatives at the '45 Election."

Priscilla called out to Kimmie: "Wotcher, Joan Crawford, 'ow's tricks?"

Kimmie smiled and replied: "Fine."

She ordered two glasses of port because she and D.P. did not really like the taste of beer, and she was afraid Queenie would be sarcastic if they had shandies. A short conference had taken place in her flat with D.P. with regard to their drink order when they went down to the *Duke's Arms* and they decided that sherry would be too "snobbish".

Mr. Flarf beamed benevolently at the girls and Maxie nudged Kid Cato and murmured appreciatively under his breath.

"How are the darts champions this evening?" Mr. Flarf enquired.

Kimmie answered and assured him that they were very well but that their dart-playing was just as poor, and D.P. added that they still had 'L's sewn on their backs.

Maxie, who was fiddling about with One-armed Bert's Commando knife, said:

"It's O.K. partner, if the darts don't stick in—you can use this," He exhibited the knife, and added:

"Or we'll deal with our opponents with it."

"Oh, you men are like kids with your knives and your bombs 'n' 'things," grumbled Queenie. "Put it away now, the war's been over months." She turned to pour out the port for the girls and added, over her shoulder:

"I thought it was Bert's."

"So it was. I bought it off him," Max replied, proudly. He hoped Kimmie would be impressed.

"Going to manicure your customers as well as shave 'em," suggested Mr. Flarf.

This apparently amused Mr. Brember very much for he laughed silently for a considerable period after the general laughter had subsided.

There was a sudden tap on the window of the public house and Weak-minded Arthur peered in. Mrs. Starling who was sitting quietly by the window (like a Damon Runyan character minding her own business and wishing no part of any argument), jumped in fright and emitted a little : "Oh!"

"That's all right, Mother," Kid Cato reassured her. Mrs. Starling was never a Mother, but the Kid always called oldsters of her ilk "Mother" and her counterparts, "Dad".

"It's Arthur!" Queenie exclaimed, superfluously.

"Wot, Arthur an' his Round Table?" said Maxie, winking at Kimmie.

"If it is, I'll have a Square Meal on it!" Mr. Flarf replied, magnificently rising to the occasion.

"Let the poor devil in," suggested Priscilla, and, as she said this, the door opened, but it was Rory Malone who entered. He had watched Kimmie and D.P. go into the pub, and he waited a moment or two before going down himself. He nodded to the company and bid them a "Good evening, all." The replies were agreeable if luke-warm. Rory was too complex a character, too moody and temperamental to be popular with the habitués at the *Duke's Arms*. Maxie looked put out for he had seen an opportunity of furthering his acquaintance with Kimmie. Mr. Flarf, anxious to preserve the jolly mood which had existed, called for another song.

"Somethink sentimental," Queenie pleaded.

There was a nervous cough from Mr. Brember and to everyone's astonishment and delight he timidly suggested: "How about 'Just a Song at Twilight'?"

This was immediately acclaimed, and started. Meanwhile, Rory, looking round the bar, nodded to Mrs. Starling, who nervously smiled back (she hadn't been asked to "pose" for her picture again so imagined she hadn't "taken" well. He was such a *queer* man!) He moved over to Kimmie and D.P. and asked them to have a drink. The song had begun and they could not hear him as he gestured. They smiled and indicated their ports. Rory smiled at them and Kimmie thought what a pity it was he did not smile more often. He had a nice smile. He was really quite a lamb—when all that wolf's clothing was torn off.

Since the singing was now at full tilt, Kimmie leaned over to D.P. and said into her ear:

"I hope he's going to telephone."

"Of course he is, you nit," D.P. reassured her.

Rory eyed them uneasily: were they talking about him? What were

they saying? That Deepy—she hated him ; yet, if she but knew it, her interests were his interests.

"We'll never hear it ringing," Kimmie said to D.P., adding:

"Not with this din. It's something I hadn't thought about."

"Well, you can't go and stand in the passage, *looking* at it," D.P. replied. "Relax."

"Easy for you, you're not expecting a call," Kimmie said.

"And who says I'm not?" D.P. whispered back.

"Are you D.P.? How exciting! Is it Charles? I believe you'd *like* Charles to be 'phoning you—I believe you two are attracted just as Eustace said, once."

D.P. made a grimace. "Be yourself," she protested.

"Who is your mysterious caller? Do tell me," Kimmie entreated. D.P. bent over and whispered in her ear:

"Casardil!"

Kimmie laughed outright and Rory with an apprehensive look wondered if . . . was it aimed at him . . . were they discussing him?

"Be serious."

"No one's telephoning me, I merely resented the fact that you took it for granted that I had no caller," white-faced D.P. confessed.

"I'm not sure that anyone's going to telephone me either," Kimmie replied.

The song ended amidst much applause and Priscilla, flushed and pleased at being the centre of attraction, glanced over at Rory Malone. Why didn't that big galoot paint her singing with her new hair-do and all the men round her? What a romantic job he had painting, whilst the Kid was a bookie. A Bookie's Bit, that's all she was. Not even his wife—yet. She frowned and looked petulantly across at Kid Cato.

"What's the matter, Duchess? Song made you sad?"

"No. You have," she retorted. His handlebar eyebrows elevated, making him look even more astonished than ever.

"Better have a cheerful one, next. Any suggestions for another, Mr. B.?" Mr. Flarf asked. He looked in the direction of Mr. Brember, but the latter, surprised at his own forwardness in suggesting the first, now relapsed into mumbled excuses.

Rory took the opportunity, while ideas were being exchanged, to ask the girls how they were enjoying their tuition and Maxie, with a wink at the Kid, ran his thumb just above the edge of his newly acquired Commando knife and eyed Rory significantly. Weak-minded Arthur stood outside the window, temporarily forgotten. Kimmie was glad that, somehow, Rory was softer, more friendly. He seemed to accept life a little more than when they had first met him. She rather wished D.P. accepted him. He meant well. She told him that the term was nearly at an end. He looked unhappy. Would that mean she would spend some of her holiday at her home?

"Expect you'll have a few weeks away, with the weather so nice," Rory observed, then sipped the beer, Queenie had brought him, whilst awaiting the bad news.

"No, only about a week," Kimmie replied. "I've—er—things to do in London, that is, I—"

D.P. smiled inwardly. Kimmie never was a very good liar.

Maxie had suggested, 'Let him go, let him tarry', which had been recently successfully resurrected, and Queenie was suggesting that Priscilla should sing it solo first of all, when the telephone rang in the passage. Queenie continued her suggested arrangement of the old air, and Kimmie, inwardly fuming with impatience, sighed anxiously. Why the devil didn't Queenie hurry off to answer it. 'Hurry, hurry!' She said to herself. She glanced helplessly at D.P. who looked even more Mona Lisa-like, and an irritatingly superior Mona, at that. Still Queenie nattered, and still the telephone rang, unanswered. Then suddenly the bell stopped and Kimmie's disappointment was very pronounced. They had stopped ringing! Should she go to the telephone and see if it was Trunks? Should she ring Michael back? Of course, it might not be Michael . . . What should she . . . ?

One-armed Bert entered and, looking round the saloon bar, searched for—her! He beckoned and eagerly, excusing herself, she hurried out after him. The song was now under-way. D.P. Hockey-Marking finding herself alone with Rory and not liking it, moved casually, but with obviousness, across to little Max, and pretended to express interest in the Commando knife whilst he roared out the words " . . . a far nicer boy."

Resentfully, slighted thus, and with the significance of the words of the song, Rory finished his beer with a gulp and glared angry-eyed at D.P. He just wasn't good enough for her friend, eh? Kimmie had a 'phone call. The girls had come to the *Duke's Arms* especially to wait for that 'phone call. It was that swine Michael Dane, the two-timer . . . Rory scowled into his empty glass.

Outside with joy in her heart which thumped excitedly, and with one hand pressed to her ear to exclude 'Let him go, let him tarry', Kimmie was speaking to Michael.

"I am glad to hear your voice—it seems ages!" She confessed. Michael laughed.

"All of ten hours."

"It seems ten years!" she said. She wished he would say the same. He said:

"There seems a lot of noise down there."

"Yes. We're having a sing-song."

"What did you say?"

"A sing-song."

"I don't get that."

"Community singing."

"Oh. Yes. Yes, I can hear it."

"What have you been doing?"

"Having dinner."

"Was it nice?"

"Not too bad."

"Who with—the glamorous Phyllida?"

"Yes." Michael hesitated. "And some of the company—" He hesitated again. Better tell her. Better ease your conscience. It would be awful if it 'got out' later. Better just drop it into the conversation, as casually as . . . "and a friend of yours," he found himself saying.

"Friend of mine?"

"Yes—your neighbour."

"I don't understand."

"Miss Thing-me-bob from the block of flats."

"Not—not . . . ?" The words trailed away.

"Brenda Swift—Miss Glamour-pants," he told her, mock cheerfully, 'throwing it away', as casually as . . . did he catch a sob? The noise of the singing was confusing.

"Hallo?"

"Hallo, Michael," Kimmie was able to say.

"Oh, you're still there."

"Yes."

"Brenda Swift was up here—waiting for her boy friend or something—she was alone so she joined us for dinner," Michael explained. It sounded unconvincing, disturbing.

"Oh, good," Kimmie replied. She did not know how she managed it.

"I'll be ringing you tomorrow," Michael said. "Will you be there?"

"I don't know, Michael," she replied. Got to have some pride. Got to have some pride. Got to—got to—

"Oh! Well, I'll ring you, just in case, Kim."

"Got to—got to go now, Michael."

"Right-o."

"Thanks for calling."

"Lovely to hear you," he said.

"Good-bye!" Very quickly she replaced the receiver and, falling against the wall, held herself by the arms and began to sob, great sobs . . .

A man's arms took her gently by the shoulders.

"What is it, Kimmie. What is it, my darling?" Rory said.

"Oh, Rory . . ." she turned instinctively to him for protection. She sobbed in a way that churned-up his heart.

"Now, now, Kimmie. What's happened? Has he hurt you?"

"Take—take me out of here, Rory," she pleaded between her sobs. Thank God the singing continued, drowning her crying. Gently, with infinite attention, his arm about her, he led her along the passage and out into the courtyard. Weak-minded Arthur eyed them curiously.

Crying bitterly, Kimmie was led by him up the stairs. The irony of the situation came to him with sudden realisation. *Well, Rory boy, there you are, walking up the stairs with her, your arm about her—that's what you wanted, isn't it?*

Well . . .

"I'll be all right," she said. Her tear-stained face looked up at him

and he felt a terrible hate for Michael Dane. He nodded. She turned and with shaking fingers unlocked her flat door.

"Thank you, Rory," she sobbed. "You're very sweet."

He smiled a twisted smile.

"I'll send Deepy up, shall I?"

"No. Not yet. I'd like a good weep. She'll—she'll come up when she realises I'm not 'phoning."

"O.K."

"Thanks—I must go now."

"Oh, darling—" He began. He wanted her to cry on his chest, his arms about her, holding her tight, protectingly. She had found out, of course, about Dane and that Woman from Armynter Court Mansions. That black-hearted devil—!

"Good-night, Rory dear," she stuttered.

"Sure you'll be all right?"

"Yes, thanks."

She hurried into her little flat and he heard her fling herself on her bed and cry. It reminded him so much of himself that, suddenly, tears came into his eyes and began to flow down his cheeks. My little Kimmie . . . to do that to little Kimmie . . . He stood outside her door, his tears coursing down in company with hers.

D.P. came bounding up the stairs before he could recover his self-respect. She looked contemptuously at him and, tapping on the door, said "It's D.P., Kim." Kimmie unlatched the door and D.P., with a final, scornful look at Rory, entered the flat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ALTHOUGH nothing was said to the male members of the Frightful Five, it was plain to see that Kimmie was very upset by Michael Dane's trip to Manchester. She appeared at the Banderton next day, with eyes 'as red as fire from weeping' as Eustace put it. Then, at the suggestion of D.P., she agreed to the idea of them all going to have a vegetarian supper after work.

At the dress rehearsal of *The Tempest*, she forgot her lines and burst into tears. Kimmie "had it pretty badly", was the general opinion.

After Rory Malone had taken her up to her flat the previous evening and Dead Pan Hockey-Marking had joined her there, Kimmie had a good cry on D.P.'s shoulder, and told her of Michael's previous meeting with Brenda after the bag-snatching episode. At first, the enigmatic D.P., usually so prompt at righting wrongs, making definite statements, deft at producing solutions, was now caught on the hop. She had to admit that this, indeed, was a fast one. And indeed, so, too, was the Swift girl. "Swift by name swift by nature—what a moo!" Later, when Kimmie was more composed, they talked without getting very much further with the way to tackle the problem until D.P. decided that one

thing was important—they had to find out Michael Dane's intentions. Now what *were* they?

"I don't mean about you, Kim." D.P. had explained. "We have got to find out what is going on. I mean, how he feels about this girl, in relation to you."

"It seems pretty obvious to me," Kimmie sniffed.

"Oh, no. If it was all so clear cut, he wouldn't have bothered to ring you, I mean, if he just preferred her, then he'd drop you, that's certain."

"Thanks very much."

"No, what puzzles me is that he takes the trouble to tell you about her. Now, *why*?"

"Because—I don't know. It's all so staggering. I knew something was up—that time he told me he met her late one night, after he had gone from here."

"Yes, but why all this confessing, unless—unless he wanted his yard arm clear," D.P. continued excitedly.

"What's that mean?"

"Unless he did not want you to find out later that he'd been having a Thing with this Swift-type."

"I don't see the point."

"Well, I do. Don't you realise if he's so anxious to show there's nothing doing—"

"It's obvious that there must be plenty doing!"

"Maybe; but what I was going to say was then it's pretty clear that he is still keen on you."

"Don't be daft, D.P. How can he possibly be that—unless he's a mormon?" Kimmie replied.

"He certainly is behaving like a husband, I must admit," D.P. added, pensively.

"What?"

"Don't get mad, most husbands—" D.P. hurriedly started to explain, but Kimmie interrupted with:

"D.P. you don't know a thing about husbands, and I can assure you that if my husband—"

"It's just your husband—or, rather, your husband-to-be, that we're discussing."

"I'm not sure that I want him now."

"Ah!" D.P. exclaimed, getting a brain wave. "If we could only make him believe that."

"What?"

"If Michael thought that you preferred someone else . . . "

"He's too busy to worry about me and too interested elsewhere."

"Then why did he ring you and why did he tell you about the Swift Piece?"

"Because he's kind and thoughtful—and I still love him," Kimmie gulped, starting to cry again.

"O.K. if that's so, then you're prepared to fight for him—to get him back."

"If a man doesn't want me, I certainly don't want him."

"Good. That practically answers my question."

"It does not."

"It does you know, Kimmie. I mean, suppose Michael realised he was making an ass of himself."

"Well?"

"Well, supposing he finds you are not quite so trusting as he would think."

"What do you mean?"

"Well if he thought you were having a Thing on the side, say with Rory Malone."

"I think you're revolting!"

"H'm! No, I'm afraid you're right," D.P. mused. "We must think of something else."

"It's all right for you to take this thing calmly, it hasn't happened to you."

"I know, I'm not really an unsympathetic ox; after all, you nickname me Dead Pan."

"Oh, D.P. to think that that woman——"

"I know, Duckie. You're going to have a hell of a night worrying about it and you'll look shocking in the morning, but it can't be helped. Leave it to your Auntie Mary—I'll get a brain wave."

Kimmie did, indeed, have a bad night, and it was no wonder that half Banderton's felt that she was missing Michael Dane "something chronic", to quote Joan Davidson. But, sure enough, some time after Kimmie had "dried up" in *The Tempest*, D.P. excitedly hurried her aside and rushed her to the nearest unoccupied dressing room.

"I've got it!" she exclaimed.

"Really, D.P.?" Kimmie said eagerly.

"Yes. A wizard idea."

"Go on, then."

"Well. In thinking it over, I am sure I'm right. Michael obviously knows that this Swift is just a ship that passes in the night. He's a bit keen—infatuated and he's sort of ashamed of it. That's why he's keeping you informed. Now if he were my husband, what would I do?"

"Tell him to go to hell."

"Yes, I think I would but *you* want him back, don't you? And if I wanted him back I would give him a terrific shock. He's taken you for granted. I agree, he wouldn't believe you were having a Thing with the Malone man, but he might believe it if you were engaged."

"Engaged?"

"Yes—engaged to be married—not to Rory but to someone else," D.P. announced cheerfully, pleased at her mental handiwork.

"Are you completely bats?"

"No. On the contrary. Kim, this is terrific—look, if Michael thought that you were going to marry someone else, he'd drop that Swift dame like a hot potato!"

"But who am I going to marry?"

"Now that's the delicate part of the idea. I've got some one lined-up, someone in mind, naturally."

"Thank you so much."

"There's no need to be sarcastic. I'm trying to help you."

"D.P. I think you're crazy."

"O.K. I wash my hands of the whole thing. Lose your Michael Dane, why should I worry?" D.P. said, huffily, starting to walk away. Kimmie quickly followed.

"I'm sorry D.P. I'm a bit nervy. Go on, tell me the rest of the idea."

D.P. re-considered. "All right," she said, "but don't interrupt."

"O.K."

"Right. If you're engaged to someone—"

"Yes, but who?" Kimmie interjected impatiently.

"You told me you wouldn't interrupt."

"Well, get on with it."

"And Michael Dane heard about it, he'd throw the Swift girl overboard and soon come back to our Kimmie Blaxland."

"And who am I supposed to be engaged to?"

"It's got to be someone you *might* be engaged to—it's got to be believable."

"Of course."

"It's a process of elimination."

"It is, is it?"

"Kimmie, if you're going to get sarcastic, the whole idea's off."

"Then tell me who the lucky boy is."

"Eustace Harradine."

"What?"

"Don't you realise," D.P. continued quickly, warming to her idea, "none of the boys would believe you got engaged to them because you suddenly got the urge—they'd realise that you were just doing it to spite Michael."

"Exactly and so would Michael."

"That doesn't matter. If Michael thinks you're doing it to spite him, that's all right. All we want is to get him running down here with a tommy gun and the United States Marines; you know, 'Stop the wedding!' stuff," D.P. explained.

"I still think you're——" Kimmie began but, noticing D.P.'s frosty reaction, did not complete the sentence, and re-composed another. "And how are we going to get Eustace Harradine to make the supreme sacrifice?"

"That's where I'm really clever," D.P. said, without any modesty. "We explain to him our plan."

"We what?"

"Don't keep saying 'what' to everything," D.P. said crossly. "It's quite obvious that even if Eustace believed you wanted to marry him, you couldn't let him down after Michael had come back—I mean, even *I* wouldn't do that!"

"Do you mean you want me to tell Eustace the whole story, sort of throw myself on his mercy?"

"Gently does it. We'll give him a few drinks to, sort of, mellow him."

"This is the end! You *are* crazy!" Kimmie fumed angrily. The tears welled up in her eyes once more.

"Oh, lordie! Here we go again!" D.P. said, unkindly. Kimmie stifled her tears and hurried away. D.P. pursed her mouth, then said aloud: "It's still a good idea."

Nothing further was said about D.P.'s scheme. When Michael telephoned the *Duke's Arms* that evening he learned, with mixed feelings, that Kimmie Blaxland had not been in at all. He said he would ring again. He was beginning to regret having told Kimmie that Brenda was up in Manchester, at all. That resolute young lady had, with some amusement, guessed the reason for Michael's London calls and had had the audacity, later, to suggest: "I'm sure your sweetie won't mind about me, Michael."

Really, she was impossible; and if Kimmie was taking the fact that she was gadding about Manchester with him . . . damn Brenda! He had got to talk to Kimmie. He cursed the fact that she was not on the telephone. He promptly booked another call for just before ten and went back to finish supper, scowling furiously. Why had such complications suddenly worked into his orderly life? He knew what he wanted: he knew where he was going—and then . . . Blast all women! There was something to be said for a *Stalag luft*! Not only was Brenda mucking up his peace of mind, but Phyllida Bentley-Goddard, resentful of Brenda Swift's presence in the town, was being really difficult at rehearsals. Phyllida was still living on the notices she had received for her performance in the O.U.D.S. production of Thornton Wilder's *Skin of Your Teeth*. He was finding it difficult to amend her manner of playing every scene as if she had just been awarded the Hollywood Oscar for the best performance of the year. She was Phyllida giving her performance. She was never the character. He was steadily changing all that, but it was hard work. Phyllida was dining with friends that night, thank heaven. Someone who had played lacrosse with her at L.M.H. That was rather how Phyllida walked across the stage, as if she had a lacrosse stick (or was it bat?) in her hands. He was also steadily changing all that. But a man could do so much, and no more. He had not yet found the right way to change the fact that Brenda was still in Manchester. She had lit a cigarette by the time he returned to their table.

"Aha!" said Brenda. "I observe the danger signals. You're mad. That left eyebrow . . . Didn't you get through?"

"Can you be persuaded to mind your own business?"

"You are my business—and if you say monkey-business I'll be very cross, because it's not true and it's certainly not very funny."

Michael stared moodily at the other people in the supper room.

"Well, what are you thinking about?"

"Lacrosse sticks."

"Intriguing."

"Not at all, I'm livid with everything and everybody," Michael glared across at Brenda, adding: "And that *does* mean you!"

She smiled sweetly at him.

"Then she *did* mind about me!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your sweetie-pie."

"Will you stop talking about my 'sweetie-pie'."

"Well, the attractive blonde child who was at the Ballet with you. My neighbour. If I'd ever thought that the sort of boy friend she had would suit me, I'd have—"

"Look here, Brenda Swift, I'm warning you—!"

"And you *do* suit me, Michael Dane." She blew a cloud of cigarette smoke skywards. "Hope you don't mind if I smoke. Got to look nonchalant when you're alone at a table and you were *ages* talking to your—er—what *is* her name, Michael?"

"Brenda, I really must ask you to leave this hotel," Michael said firmly. Brenda promptly laughed.

"What a delicious idea—why?"

"Because Miss Bentley-Goddard, Oxford's gift to the West End stage, will have it all round London that you and I are living in sin together."

"Do you mind what London thinks?"

"It isn't going to do either of us any good." Michael evaded a direct answer.

"Thanks for the compliment and I'll repeat my question."

"Are you going to move or shall I?" Michael threatened.

"Why didn't you think of this last night?" Brenda challenged.

"Why, indeed!"

"Is it what London will think, or your little S.P.?"

"You're making me angry, Brenda."

"Yes. I can see that and I find it rather disturbing, I don't think many women can upset you, Michael." She paused and studied him and then blew out another cloud of smoke. It hung for a moment on the warm air and then floated away. . . . She sighed. . . .

"It's taking an awful lot to get you to see this in the right perspective, Michael." . . . the Brenda Swifts of this world. . . .

"All very high-sounding. Come on, what do you mean?"

"Your tactics are deplorable. You and I have met and will continue to meet. We have something for one another. We always will."

He smiled contemptuously.

"You can smile but I'm telling you something which you know in your heart to be true."

"Yes?"

"Yes. And all this fiddle-de-dee about either you leave the hotel or I do—"

"I didn't say that."

"Well, it would have had to be that because you can't order me out of your hotel, or your life, Michael."

"No?"

"No. And now I'll surprise you. I'm catching the ten-thirty down to London tonight."

"Oh!"

"I thought you'd be surprised."

"I am."

"Don't look so relieved. And don't think you've won some sort of victory, I only intended staying one night."

"Yes?"

"Yes. You see, I've some unfinished business to attend to in the Big City."

He thought of her in terms of Armynter Court Mansions.

"A summons from *your sweetie-pie*?"

"Not a summons, Michael, oh dear me no! Not a summons. You're going to see me to the train, I hope?"

"Of course."

"I've never seen anyone look so happy," Brenda said.

"I've been having a pretty bloody day," Michael told her.

"Then there's the consolation in the fact that you've found a friend to come and tell your sorrows to."

He looked up sharply at the word 'friend' and was silent for a moment. She *was* a friend; that was the odd part. She had that quality. One could always "call on" Brenda—in all senses of the word. But that could not be. Oh, dear me no! He said:

"I hope your lord and master isn't livid at your departure?"

"I told you, he was away for a few days."

"And the prodigal returns?"

"Him or me?"

"I wouldn't know that," Michael said.

Brenda stubbed out her cigarette.

"Let's go!" Michael said impatiently. She had gummed up things nicely and he wanted to see her on to that train and then telephone Kimmie.

Later, at the station before the train moved out, she said: "You know, I'll have to repeat your words to me—either she'll have to leave Armynter Court—or I will," she said, with a tantalising smile.

"I never made it an ultimatum," Michael protested.

"No?" said Brenda. "Well, I did."

She quickly put her arms around him and kissed him. "I've never seen a man look so astonished." She laughed gaily, as she stepped into the train.

"Wipe the lipstick off your ear, Michael," she commanded him. "You look so stupid!"

"You really are a—"

"Yes. And you love it, don't you?" She challenged.

"No, I do not!" He replied indignantly.

"No? We'll see," she said.

The guard blew his whistle and waved his flag. The porters turned, arms raised, carrying forward his signal.

"And Michael," she called out, over the chug of the slowly moving train, "not an ultimatum. I'm going to wind up my affairs."

"How do you spell affairs?" he shouted. He felt so relieved at her departure, he could afford to joke.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WHEN Michael waved good-bye to Brenda Swift at Manchester, the Frightful Five sat at a table in a small club in Soho and drank lager with an attempt at studied sophistication which, despite their tuition at the Banderton, fooled no one. It was Harry Barlow's idea—that they should go on to a night club. The *Merry Hell* should not have had the audacity to call itself a night club. But it did.

After the Frightful Five had had their vegetarian supper ("It may be better for you in the hot weather but I'm still hungry!" from Harry Barlow) and conversation was tactfully steered around any allusion to Michael Dane on his departure North, Charles Grafton suggested that they might "take in" a news reel.

"Be taken in, you mean—what do you see?" D.P. asked, scathingly. "Last week's news, an old cartoon and a dreary travel picture—travelling through Irak on a tricycle—all for a bob. I'd rather have a beer."

"You can have a beer after the news reel," Charles replied.

"Let's spend the extra half-a-kick and go to the Leicester Square, there's a flick—" Harry Barlow began.

"I haven't got the extra half-a-kick," Eustace interjected mournfully.

"Oh, darn you, Eustace. You're perpetually broke."

Eustace nodded. "I feel like Spencer Tracy—in something or other—broke but happy."

"The only difference is that you're broke, but dismal," Charles said.

Eustace paid no regard to this criticism, he merely replied, loftily: "I have things on my mind. And I see no reason because your people happen to have oodles of cash for you to throw my poverty in my face."

"'Ark at 'im."

"Who are you now, Eustace—Charles Laughton?"

"I am Eustace Harradine—myself."

"That's a change!"

"My people have not got oodles of cash—you're thinking of the Hockey-Markings."

"Oh, lordie! That reminds me, I haven't telephoned Mother to tell

her I'm staying with you tonight, Kim. I'd better do it now. Anyone got any pennies?" D.P. asked.

"D.P. always wants to telephone at the wrong moment."

"Stuff it and hand me over two coppers."

"And she never has any pennies."

"Decide what we're going to do by the time I get back," D.P. said.

She went back to the restaurant to 'phone from there. When she reached the telephone, a stout gentleman was explaining, presumably to his wife, that he would be home late. D.P. butted in authoritatively with a "Please hurry. I'm on Government work and I must use the telephone." Her tone was such that he hurriedly rang off and apologised for delaying her. It was only later in the evening, in thinking about it, he realised that she had traded on the fact that through the war he had been regimented so much, he obeyed the magic words "Government work" automatically. Now what sort of Government work could she be on and—damn it!—It was peace time, now, he was entitled to telephone at leisure if he wanted to. Blast the girl!

When D.P. returned to Kimmie and the boys after a row with her mother, who deplored the lack of consideration on her daughter's part, Charles Grafton had agreed with the others to go to a Newsreel Cinema. D.P. sniffed.

"Well, I'm going to have my beer afterwards."

"You little devil, you!" Charles said, pretending to admire this.

"Oh, shut up Charles and try and look less like a movie actor and more like a man!"

"Hold on to your hats, kids," said Harry Barlow. "Here they go again."

"And don't you talk in the flicks," D.P. turned to Harry. "I can't stand people who talk at the cinema."

"And I can't stand people who shush you," Harry retorted.

"If you'd all stop bickering and start moving," Kimmie suggested, ". . . any moment now, people will start throwing pennies at us."

"What's wrong with that?" Eustace enquired.

"Not a bad idea. The Quintette du Hot Club de Banderton," Harry suggested. "I'll take the melody."

"I'll take your hat. They can chuck the pennies into that."

"What's wrong with my hat?" Harry asked Charles Grafton indignantly.

"What's right with it?"

"Well, it fits him," Eustace said.

"Yes, it fits him."

"Which," snapped D.P., "is more than yours does, Charles."

"Come on!" said Kimmie. She was very 'touchy'. All the time she was thinking of Michael, wondering if he would telephone . . . Hoping he would wire her . . .

They enjoyed the Newsreel Theatre programme and D.P. had to admit that even she had been pleasantly surprised. When they came out of the cinema, nearly an hour later, it was still early evening and,

since they were near Armynter Court, Harry suggested that they went and had a beer at Kimmie's local. Eustace did not like the idea of Kimmie going into a common pub but suggested, instead, that Kimmie should invite them all into her flat and make them tea.

This idea was approved by Charles and Harry, but D.P., quickly sensing that Kimmie might weaken if Queenie at the *Duke's Arms* sent across to her flat to say that she was wanted on the telephone if Michael did telephone, decided to oppose this. Kimmie was thinking 'Yes, I want to be on the spot. I want to be there.' Suppose Michael telephoned and wanted to propose and she was not there . . . ? It was a silly idea of hers to try and put on an indifference she did not feel. 'Oh Michael darling, do *please* telephone me!' But Dead Pan, watching her, said:

"I want a beer and I don't want it at Kimmie's mangy local."

"It isn't a mangy local."

"I can't stand that black parting in Queenie's hair." D.P. replied. "It revolts me as much as Min's salmon-pink gums."

"I think Queenie's divine," Eustace said. "So 'corny'."

"What about Mr. Flarfy? There's a kerricter," Charles added.

"Let's go to your local, Kimmie. We haven't been for ages." Harry pleaded. Kimmie looked across at Dead Pan who shook her head vigorously and frowned.

"Well, . . ." Kimmie began. Heavens, what was the matter with her? She was becoming spineless, gutless and lacking in character, had been, ever since she had fallen in love.

"O.K." she said to Harry, challenging D.P. with her eyes. "We will." In any case, she hadn't forgiven D.P. for her crazy ideas about spiting Michael. She looked across at D.P. who shrugged her shoulders.

Mr. Flarfy had been suddenly called away again on one of his tours, so things were quiet in the *Duke's Arms*; Maxie had left soon after his evening pint; Kid Cato and Priscilla were out dancing at the Astoria; Mr. Brember was fitting a new sail to his yacht in the privacy of his flatlet; Rory Malone was drunk at the *Pelican* off King Street and of the "regulars", only Mrs. Starling, was sitting quietly imbibing in her customary corner. Weak-minded Arthur was not to be seen. Others in the bar, referred to somewhat contemptuously by Queenie as "casuals", gazed with interest as the two girls with their three escorts entered the saloon bar and greeted Queenie.

"Well, I never!" Queenie said. "Talk about strangers! I don't mean you two," Queenie added, turning to the girls, "But where have you boys been, I'd like to know?"

"Aha, Queenie!" Harry Barlow chipped her. "Been missing your bit of glamour about the place?"

"Of course. Suppose you've been having your half pint at the Ritz?"

"That's right, it tastes better out of a gold tankard," Eustace said. Queenie sniggered. She secretly blessed the arrival of the five young

people, perhaps the place would perk-up, the casuals were a dreary lot and Mrs. Starling was a wet blanket, and no mistake.

"What'll it be, gents?"

The orders were given and Kimmie, wondering if Rory Malone would come in, hoped that, if he did, Dead Pan would not cut him. Although Rory had been very sweet the previous evening about Michael, D.P. was still suspicious of him and would never really like him.

When Queenie brought the orders, she said:

"By the way, dearie, there was a phone call for you." She looked across at Kimmie whose heart suddenly beat faster. Michael? Michael had telephoned. Perhaps? She caught D.P.'s eyes watching her, narrowing a little. 'Don't cheapen yourself', was the look.

"Oh, yes?" She managed to say, casually in reply to Queenie.

"Long distance. Trunks. They said they would ring again. I said I—"

The telephone bell in the passage rang insistently and Queenie looked astonished.

"Well, what a co-incidence! Must be them now. Would you like to answer it, it's probably for you?" Queenie suggested. There was a pause while the telephone bell rang on. Kimmie hesitated uncomfortably. D.P. quickly said:

"I'll go."

Charles Grafton paused in the sipping of his mild-and-bitter and looked at Kimmie, open-mouthed. He had guessed that the call was from Michael Dane in Manchester. He glanced quickly at Eustace and Harry but they did not seem to have grasped the significance of the call. Dead Pan hurried out to the telephone. Kimmie finished her beer, and with attempted bravado but with ears following D.P.'s footsteps to the telephone, she asked gaily:

"I'll buy a round. Same again please, Queenie."

Queenie decided that it might cheer things up again if she cracked her famous stand-by.

"Can't give you the same, dearie. Give you something similar," she retorted cheerily. A watery smile appeared on the faces of one or two of the bovine "casuals". "Lota lemons!" murmured Queenie under her breath, as she collected the Frightful Five's glasses. . . . "Casuals', cha!"

"Cheer up, Queenie!" Harry Barlow said. Queenie sniffed. She jerked her head in the direction of the "casuals". "I wouldn't give you a thank you for 'em." She imparted.

Kimmie, straining her ears to catch Dead Pan's conversation, frowned at Harry. Charles watched her closely. Then, almost at once, D.P. was back. She smiled faintly and she merely said "It's O.K. I dealt with it."

Charles Grafton's curiosity was, by now, so roused that he had to ask:

"Who was it?"

"Well, I'm damned!" D.P. exclaimed. "Anything else you'd like to know?"

Charles looked huffed.

"Keep your drawers on," he said.

Queenie overheard this and gave a high-pitched cackle, and then, remembering that Mr. Flarf would consider that it perhaps bordered on the rude, stopped short and reprimanded in a refined manner:

"Now, now! Manners!"

Kimmie tried to find the answer herself by searching D.P.'s pallid face, but D.P. gave nothing away.

"I'd gladly buy you all a drink, if I had the money," Eustace suddenly observed.

"That's fine," said Harry, caustically.

"You're slightly inebriated, Eustace Harradine," Charles told him.

"Trust Charles to say 'inebriated' and not cock-eyed," D.P. flashed.

"You bore me," Charles said, deliberately. But she did not and, as she looked at him, she was convinced that the disdainful, good-looking Charles *was* becoming keen. In truth, he had admitted to himself that perhaps a man of his temperament might be bored by the inevitable goodness of Kimmie Blaxland. A man of his senses needed excitement and it was doubtful if he could ever remain true to one woman. Kimmie would expect that. D.P. would not, nor would she be true to one man herself. Was that her attraction? Was she inherently a bitch? He sighed and wished he knew the answer.

"Well," he said slowly, lazily, "It's me for bed. It's been a lovely evening, folks."

"In spite of all the rain," from Queenie.

Kimmie gulped . . . memories, oh dear, memories!

"Hasn't rained for a week, Queenie, must be your drains," Harry said.

"Now, now!" Queenie cautioned Harry, and then wheezed into a throaty cough.

"Bed? Ridiculous notion. I want to be gay and bright. I want someone to take me out and buy me a good time," Eustace said.

"You miserly little basket!" said Harry.

"Well, I do. Why shouldn't I be honest and admit it?"

"I am not going to pay for your dissipations," Charles Grafton told him. "I am going to bye-byes."

"Go—and never call me friend again."

"You're stinking," Harry Barlow told him. Eustace shook his head.

"Half-cut and half-theatre," he reassured Harry.

"That's the trouble with Eustace, you can never tell where the acting stops and the drinking begins."

"Kimmie and D.P. are 'home', so I suggest we three from Happidrome wander off as quietly as Eustace will let us."

"We're a gaggle of drunks," Eustace said, sadly contemplating his empty beer glass.

"You mean a stumble—if it's not a stumble of drunks, it ought to be!" Harry suggested.

"I'm off now. Are you blokes coming?"

"No!" said Eustace, emphatically. "I want to be wined, dined—and loved."

"Oh, nuts. I'm off," said Charles, but he did not leave. He looked at Harry.

"I feel a bit in the groove, myself," Harry confessed.

"Tight?"

"Good heavens, no. But I'd rather like to go places and do things," said Harry.

"You'd better take Eustace up to Gerrard Street," Charles replied, scathingly.

"What about a party?" Harry said, excitedly. "Let's go to a club."

"Oh yes—let's drop into Ciro's," D.P. suggested, cuttingly.

"No. I'll take you to my club—it's only a couple of bob entrance fee," Harry persisted, enthusiastically.

"Not me!" from Charles.

"Couple of bob to get in, eight pounds for a small gin and fifteen guineas cover charge, I suppose," said D.P.

Harry looked sulkily back at her. "Of course not; it's a swing club," he replied, as if that explained matters.

"I want to go to Harry's club," the lugubrious Eustace said, with deliberateness.

"I'm game," Harry said. "What about it? Do us all good."

D.P. looked closely at Eustace and then across at Kimmie.

"O.K.! Let's go," she said, with determination.

Kimmie looked at her in surprise.

"Do you . . . ?"

"Yes," D.P. said. "Harry's right. Do us all good."

"Well, I must powder first."

"So must I." D.P. turned to the three boys. "You chaps have another beer while we nip up to Kimmie's."

"Good idea. Who's got any money?" Eustace asked.

The girls left the saloon bar.

"I think I go home," Charles said.

"Nonsense!"

"Yes."

"I wonder who that call was from?" he mused. Harry looked at him in surprise.

"What's the matter with you, Charles?"

"All very strange," Charles said. "Very strange indeed. Say good night to the girls for me." He added, walking to the door.

"But Charles, aren't you—"

"No."

"Oh!"

"Cheer-ho!" Charles said. He left the bar.

Up in Kimmie's flat, D.P. was explaining about the telephone call.

"I told Michael you were out with Eustace."

"What? Now what good did that do? Suppose he was 'phoning to—well, make it up." Kimmie expostulated.

"Make *what* up? You haven't quarrelled, have you?"

"Not exactly."

"Michael had that piece Brenda Swift up there with him. You're now showing him he can't get away with it."

"I don't think he'll be very worried by Eustace Harradine taking me out," Kimmie said.

"Maybe not. But you weren't sitting on the mat waiting for his call—that'll shake him. And it'll shake him more if you're engaged to Eustace Harradine."

"Now, Dead Pan Hockey-Marking—"

"Look, ninny," D.P. replied. "He won't believe you're serious, but he will want to stop you doing something crazy in a fit of pique."

"Yes, but supposing he was telephoning to tell us *he* was engaged to Brenda Whoosit?"

"Trust you to think of that? Why should he? He's not under any obligation to you—is he? Now, Eustace is in a nice fruity mood—"

"You're not going to get him to propose to me while he's tight, are you?" Kimmie exclaimed.

"I'm not going to get him to propose to you at all." D.P. told her.

"You want me to vamp him?"

"No, you ass. Give Eustace credit for having some horse sense. We must appeal to his sense of the dramatic."

"I propose to *him*?"

"You do not. We tell him of our plan and he does a Sidney Carton."

Kimmie looked at D.P. for a long time and then, to the latter's surprise, said, with sudden decision:

"D.P. you've got something there!"

"That's the girl!" said D.P., encouragingly.

With Charles Grafton out of the party, Kimmie and D.P. found it easier to 'approach' Eustace. At the *Merry Hell* club, where the proprietor, a bearded young man whom Harry had met at a Swing Club rally at the Hammersmith Palais de Danse, treated the party as if they were minor royalty and ordered them drinks "on the house."

"The house" comprising a damp cellar, (in which a three-piece band played fast and furiously for the benefit of tight-skirted women and tight-headed men, who considered candles on the clothless tables and rude drawings on the walls, super-sophistication); a small lavatory, and an even smaller kitchen where sandwiches were cut and so was the whiskey. Harry was able, by an abundance of "cheek" and enthusiasm to persuade the drummer (a double-whiskey acted as the carrot) to let him have a go with the percussion stuff.

This meant that D.P. and Kimmie were able to utilise the time to *plot*, while Harry was beating up the drums.

Eustace, sadder as he became more drunk, began to recite bits of his Caliban dialogue until D.P. steered the conversation round to other channels. She said, in an undertone to Kimmie, "It would help if those

mugs played something gooey. Go and talk to Harry while I tell Eustace how Michael's let you down."

Kimmie nodded.

It took her a long time to shout down the other two members of the combination, and when she managed to explain to Harry on his dais, that Eustace wanted a waltz, Harry promptly replied, throwing a drum stick into the air and catching it deftly to the appreciation of a jivey customer: "He's had it! No waltzes here." And Kimmie reluctantly returned to her table. She arrived back there, squeezing her way past twirling, perspiring couples, in time to hear Eustace saying sorrowfully: "My poor little Kimmie!" He gave her a look of tragic tenderness, and nodded as if to assure her of his help.

"Now," D.P. explained in a too-sickly sweet voice that Kimmie felt was far too studied, "this is where you really can help her." She turned to Kimmie and asked: "Where's that waltz?"

"They don't play waltzes here."

"Oh, lordie!" D.P. thought for a moment and then whispered: "Can you cry?"

"Cry?"

"Yes. Tears, you nit. Big whoppers," she whispered.

"I don't think so," Kimmie whispered back.

"Well, you're supposed to be an actress—try!"

Kimmie squeezed her face up like a baby's but nary a tear appeared.

"How can I help you, Kimmie, Sweetling?" Eustace asked sorrowfully.

"Well, I'll tell you," D.P. began, she turned to Kimmie and suggested: "See if the chef's got an onion."

Kimmie nodded. She hurried off to ask Harry's bearded friend if they had an onion in the house.

"How can I help lil' Kimmie?" the morose Eustace enquired again and hiccupped loudly.

"Parm me," he said, apologetically.

"Now listen Eustace, if you really want to help Kimmie this is your opportunity."

Despite the three solid senders on the orchestra dais, D.P. told, with harrowing details, how Kimmie had been spurned. Eustace was touched. Eustace was indignant. Eustace realised that he must do something to make Kimmie happy. If only she wanted him: if only she would marry him. D.P. continued:

"So, if Michael *thought* that Kim was going to marry someone else . . . "

"Marry someone else?" echoed Eustace, looking very surprised. They hadn't—they didn't—they . . . ?

"Yes. If Kimmie were *engaged* to another man . . . " D.P. explained.

"If you think you could do this for me, Eustace," Kimmie took up the plea. "I know it's the most awful cheek but . . . " There were tears in her eyes and the odour of onions pervaded the table.

"You want me to become engaged to Kimmie?" Eustace asked, his face lighting up with pleasure at the prospect.

"Yes."

"If you would. It would be a marvellous gesture."

"Kimmie engaged to me—to *me*?"

"But Eustace," D.P. added quickly, not quite sure by his tone, what his answer would be, the joy on his face might mean he was going to deliver an awful quelcher, "it's something no one else would do. It's—it's a Harradine gesture."

"Do you want to be engaged to me, Kimmie?" Eustace turned to Kimmie, uncomprehendingly.

"Yes, please." She said.

"Boy-oh-boy!" Eustace gave a wild yell and suddenly overturned the table. There were frightened shouts from the next table and Kimmie and D.P. jumped to their feet. Fortunately no food or liquid had touched their dresses. An indignant young man with long hair and a red and white check shirt in a falsetto voice told Eustace not to be "camp", and two voluble simian-like waiters grappled with the slap-happy Eustace. Harry Barlow came speedily over from the dance floor. The bearded proprietor ran in from the kitchen. Chaos and confusion reigned.

"Get him out, he's drunk!"

"Stop that noise!"

"You great pug-ugly!" shrilled the long-haired young man in the check shirt.

"Now, now, this won't do," said the bearded proprietor angrily.

"What's—what's happened?" Harry Barlow asked, with flushed face. What a terrible thing to happen in a swing club!

"Whoopee! Yoicks and tally-ho!" shouted Eustace. "I'm engaged. I'm going to be married!"

Kimmie gasped and looked at D.P.

"What?" exclaimed Harry. The news was even more stunning than the catastrophe. "You are? Who to?"

"Kimmie, of course. I'm engaged to Kimmie Blaxland," Eustace said joyfully as the waiters prepared to put him out.

"Well, I'm damned!" Harry Barlow exclaimed.

Kimmie sat down again by the upturned table. She looked up at Dead Pan Hockey-Marking. D.P. for once had no come-back.

"Congratulations!" Kimmie said sarcastically. She shook her head.

"It seemed like a good idea . . . "

"The best laid schemes . . . " she began.

"When did it all happen?" Harry asked eagerly.

"It didn't," D.P. said, trying desperately to save the situation. "Eustace had too much to drink," she added, for Kimmie's benefit; "If he had had one less, it would have been just right."

"What is going on?" Harry asked, as they prepared to follow Eustace into the street. But the proprietor was buzzing angrily around

and Harry had to renew his apologies. Kimmie turned to D.P. and asked.

"And where, little fixer-upper, do we go from here?"

"Don't Kim. Not tonight. I'm sorry," D.P. said and added stubbornly, "I *still* think it was a good idea."

Kimmie merely looked at her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AFTER Kimmie and D.P. had left Harry, so that he and the bearded manager of the *Merry Hell* could get Eustace Harradine home, there was an icy silence between them in their taxi back to Armynter Court, nor would they have broken it if they had not, on arrival at the courtyard, stumbled over a leg protruding from the entrance to Casardi's café. For a brief moment they thought they had found a body and D.P., usually so strong-willed, was the one who gasped and clung to Kimmie, and it was Kimmie who, chin up and with attempted bravado, went closer to inspect.

"Good grief!" she exclaimed. "Rory Malone!"

"What? Don't tell me someone got him?" D.P. exclaimed.

"No. He's—he's dead drunk," Kimmie told her.

"Nice people we seem to know," D.P. observed. Their momentary scare drew the two girls together again.

"What are we going to do with him?"

"Leave the brute there, of course."

"We can't do that."

"Of course we can. It's a lovely night and, besides it'll teach him to behave in future."

"D.P. we can't just leave him there for all the Court to see in the morning."

"Why not? Everyone knows he gets stinking."

"Here, take his arms. We'll try and lift him."

"Are you crazy?"

"No. But he's been very kind to me, I can't just walk off and leave him."

"O.K., Good Samaritan, but we'll never be able to lift him."

"We've got to!" Kimmie said, firmly. "Come on!"

By a concerted effort the girls managed to lift Rory an inch or two off the ground and, with great exertion, they carried him over the cobbles to the outside door of the entrance to the flats.

"We'll never get him up the stairs," puffed D.P. "Gosh, he's a weight!"

Rory Malone, breathing heavily, muttered something unintelligible. At the door, the girls put him down and drew in deep breaths, exhaling with relief.

"Why we didn't just leave him there . . . " D.P. began.

"We couldn't do that."

"We can't get him up the stairs."

Kimmie wrinkled up her brow and frowned down at Rory's log-like figure.

"Fancy getting so paralitic that you're completely 'out,'" D.P. said. "Eustace was foolish and befuddled but nothing compared with this beauty."

"The Big City's getting sordid," Kimmie observed.

"Has been—ever since the war."

"Still, I like it," Kimmie added.

"In spite of the Rory Malones?"

"The Rory Malones make up the City—just as we all do," Kimmie replied.

"If you think I'm going to stand here holding this drunken oaf's fists while you ham it *à la* Pepys, you've another thought coming. Get a bucket of water and throw it over him, that's the best thing to do!" D.P. advised.

"No. We'll try and get him up and, if we fail, we'll put a blanket over him and hope he sleeps it off."

"Sleeps it off? He'll have to be chiselled out of that stupor!"

"Come on; one, two, three!"

The girls staggered with the inert figure of Rory, reached the stairs and with much gasping, finally had to put him down. D.P. began to snigger.

"If Michael Dane could see you now."

Kimmie glared at her. Just then there were footsteps in the yard. A burly young policeman peered into the doorway and blinked in astonishment.

"Good evening, Officer," Kimmie said, cheerily.

"Believe it or not, we're waiting for the dust cart," D.P. added.

"May I enquire what—?"

"Oh, this?" Kimmie pointed at the body.

"Yes, that."

"Well it's a long story, Officer . . . "

"They usually are, but they condense well."

"Police College type," D.P. murmured to Kimmie, and added for the Constable's benefit, "He's tight. We don't like him but he lives on the floor below us. We want to put him to bed."

"That is, we don't want to put him to bed," Kimmie added, hastily, "so if you'd——"

At this, the porter from the Mansions, yawning, sleepy-eyed and fatuous-faced, blinked in at the open doorway.

"Good!" Kimmie said. "Now we really can leave you to it."

"We couldn't put him to bed, anyway," D.P. added. "It wouldn't be modest. And we two maidens, too."

The young policeman blushed furiously. D.P. chuckled.

"Good night, Officer," she said.

Next morning Banderton's was agog with the news of Kimmie's

engagement. Harry Barlow, arriving early, (and sporting a pale fawn pullover) spread it with characteristic zeal and generosity. He had, alone in the taxi the previous night after seeing Eustace home, a feeling of hurt, that Kimmie should not have chosen him, and he was surprised, after the hectic "rush" Michael Dane had given her, that that should have fizzled out so suddenly; but, nevertheless, Kimmie had chosen one of "the gang" and jolly good luck to the happy pair. Naturally they could not marry for ages—everybody knew that Eustace had about fourpence and Kimmie's people never had a bean. But it was the idea of it which was so pleasant—darling Kimmie and good old Eustace! Harry wondered how Charles Grafton would take it.

Banderton's was in the throes of its last-minute touches for the end of term play and competitions, and a large body of students had arrived early the morning of Harry's announcement of the news, so that, when Kimmie and Dead Pan appeared in the Great Hall, there was an excited murmur of congratulation; among the first to come up was Joan Davidson with her stooge Enid Webster. In Joan's eye there was a gleam of surprised curiosity. But, when Kimmie had got over the shock of all those smiles and congratulations, D.P. Hockey-Marking had discreetly edged out of reach. Charles Grafton, angry-eyed, disbelieving, anxious for a word with her, arrived in the Hall just before it was closed and could not find her.

During prayers, a bewildered Kimmie requested very definitely that something should happen to get her out of this awful predicament and please could not Michael Dane hurry back and if so, couldn't he please have forgotten Brenda Whoosit and couldn't they please be married, and even if she didn't get the Banderton Distinction Medal (It was obvious that she wouldn't rate the Gold One), she would be a very happy girl and it really wasn't much to ask when you considered some of the things some of the girls might be praying for.

Whereupon, whether in answer to her prayers or whether to complicate matters for her still further, she knew not, Eustace, an even more sorrowful-looking Eustace, a fugitive from a hang-over, appeared. There was an excited group about him, and Kimmie groaned inwardly. Passing her, en route to her class, the tall tragic Miss Wentworth smiled in, what was meant to be, a romantic applauding expression, but which turned out like a smell under the nose. *Heavens!* thought Kimmie, the whole Academy knows. What did one do—go over to Eustace? Where was that wretched Dead Pan Hockey-Marking? A fine fix she was in! Engaged to Eustace Harradine and nothing secret about it—no put up job but the real thing. What was her mother going to say—and Daddy? Poor old Luff he'd take it worse than Diddy. After all, Eustace was not exactly the prize catch of the season, though he might do well later. . . . Well, she had to put the best face on the matter she could muster. With a smile sicklier than Miss Wentworth's, she crossed to Eustace who was surrounded by cronies. Harry Barlow had reached Charles Grafton and they, too, were moving towards the group from the other direction. They arrived almost together.

"Hallo, Eustace!" Kimmie falteringly greeted her affianced one. She thought that Eustace was looking even more pixilated than usual.

"L-look here, K-Kimmie," he stuttered. "What's all this rot about our being engaged?" he asked.

"Eh?" Kimmie gasped.

"I don't think it's funny, particularly, and a man has his feelings even if—"

"Didn't you tell me you were engaged to Kimmie last night at the *Merry Hell*?" Harry Barlow challenged, in boggle-eyed astonishment.

"The where?"

"The *Merry Hell*."

"What's that?"

"The Night Club we were in last night?"

Eustace looked at Harry with a blank expression on his face.

"What are you talking about?" He asked.

"I knew it was all my eye and Aunt Fanny," Charles Grafton said in a superior tone.

"But you definitely told me that you and Kimmie were engaged," Harry accused. He turned to Kimmie Blaxland, as if expecting an explanation. Kimmie felt like a bad channel crossing.

"I did nothing of the kind!" Eustace denied, indignantly.

"Then why did you upset the table and get us all chucked out?" Harry asked.

"Are you crazy? We had a few drinks at Kimmie's local and went off home."

"What?" yelled Harry Barlow, getting red in the face. "Are you trying to pull my leg?"

"Well", Eustace modified it a little and asked ". . . didn't we?"

The students around them began to laugh. Kimmie did not know whether to laugh or cry.

"What is all this, Kimmie?" Charles Grafton asked her, pointedly.

"It's all a mistake. We took Eustace on to the *Merry Hell*—"

"And he got cock-eyed." Harry Barlow completed it for her. "He told me he and Kimmie were engaged."

"I did not," Eustace protested, and groaned: "Gosh, I do feel awful."

"There you are!" said Harry.

Charles Grafton sniffed in annoyed fashion. "Storm in a ruddy tea cup," he murmured and then, lest anyone should think he believed it, he added: "Not that it fooled me."

"Do please go to your classrooms," Bingo Oliphant implored.

Kimmie and company looked about them to discover that the Hall was empty of students except for Dead Pan who was waiting for Kimmie at the door.

"Come on, kids," said Eustace. "I feel awful."

D.P. hurried Kimmie along the corridor ahead of the three boys.

"It's—it's all right," Kimmie whispered to D.P. "Eustace can't remember a thing."

"So I heard," D.P. acknowledged, out of the corner of her mouth.

"We're in the clear," Kimmie whispered. It certainly was a relief. It was a crazy idea, anyway.

"Not entirely," D.P. replied. "I thought it would be a good idea to send Michael Dane a wire!"

"What?"

"Yes. When I telephoned Mother this morning, I also telephoned a wire to Michael," D.P. explained, sheepishly.

"What—what did you say?" Kimmie asked. 'As if I didn't know!'

"I—er—I told him the good news," Dead Pan said.

"Oh, you—you—!" Words failed Kimmie.

Words, too, failed Ralph Checker as he tried to interrogate Brenda Swift. Brenda was trying to get some sleep and Ralph was trying to get some information.

"Do you mean to tell me you went up to Manchester to stay the night when I was away?" He asked again. He stood by the bed, menacingly. Brenda groaned, sleep seemed the only thing that mattered for the moment.

"For the umpteenth time, Ralph, yes. Go and sell some butter scotch."

"But I don't understand . . ." Ralph spluttered. He shook his woolly head as if to clear his mind.

"Good-bye, Ralph. Call me later," Brenda murmured.

But Ralph sat on the bed.

"I don't get it. I simply don't get it. After all I've done for you. To go away to Manchester . . ." His voice trailed off. The situation was beyond him. He was so used to being the Big Shot; calling the tune—he was simply bewildered. No furtiveness, no clandestine stuff about Brenda Swift: she thought he was out of town and when he came back unexpectedly—she had gone to Manchester. No short evening "date" over which he could argue and probe and grow unpleasant about—but a whole live night! She had travelled up to Manchester to spend a whole night with someone. Of course it was preposterous. It must be connected with that wretched father of hers. She couldn't do this to him, not to Ralph Checker, not when he had given her everything. She was too glib with her story. Of course; she was shielding someone, that was it. Maybe her Old Man had made a gaol break. That was it. She was taking it on the chin for the Old Man and he had sworn her to secrecy. Ralph's indignant face softened.

"Baby . . ." he began, almost cooingly.

But Baby had fallen asleep. It made him want to slap her face, then he thought of her sacrifice again. He remembered the episode of the Greyhound track, the fierce-eyed man being led away between two policeman, the scene later when Brenda sneaked in after being out early on the Sunday morning to go to see her mother. The story poured out scornfully from her lips, twisted, cynical, petulant lips . . . She

had not wanted him or anyone to know about her background. She was a pretty staunch kid. Now she was helping the Old Man—to escape! Why it was like the movies! She was a brave sweet kid. . . . He *understood*. Women (especially his wife) did not think he understood them; they often said "Ralph, you don't *understand* women." But he did now . . . sure, sure he did. . . . He nodded to himself and murmured softly: "Yeah". Then he remembered he had an important meeting in the City. 'Come on, fella,' he told himself. 'Grass doesn't grow on a busy street.' He hurried out.

When Michael Dane received Dead Pan's telegram, he was in the middle of a rehearsal and, assuming that it was one wishing him good luck for the opening night, he stuffed it into his pocket and did not open it until later, when, buying his stage manager a beer at the Midland, he thrust his hand in his pocket to pay for the drink and found it there. Excusing himself he opened it and glanced first at the signature Mary Hockey-Marking. Yes, it was a telegram of congratulations though who—of course, Kimmie's friend D.P. Nice of her to—*good heavens, what was this?* Michael stared at the telegram in blank amazement:

'KIMMIE ANNOUNCED HER ENGAGEMENT TO EUSTACE
HARRADINE KNOW YOU WILL BE PLEASED.
MARY HOCKEY-MARKING.'

"Well, I—Well I'm damned!" Michael exclaimed.

"Anything wrong, guv'nor?" His stage manager enquired.

"Yes. No. I don't know. Bill, you'll have to excuse me. I must telephone. . . ."

"Of course. Anything I can do?"

"What? Oh, no, thanks, Bill."

"Not serious, I hope?" The stage manager ventured.

"No. Yes, I mean. Sheer madness!" Michael stuffed the telegram in his pocket and started off. He turned, suddenly, and apologised again to the stage manager.

"That's all right, Guv'nor," he was reassured. "Sorry I can't help."

Michael hurried away to the telephone. The poor crazy idiot. She couldn't go tying herself to Eustace Harradine all her life. It was sheer madness. What was *this*? Had she really taken it to heart—that Brenda Swift had been up there with him? He felt hot and uncomfortable at that 'up there with him'. It was not true, but . . . what use was it, arguing with himself? He must talk to Kimmie. He must reason with her. It was all Brenda Swift's fault . . . well, not entirely, he supposed. But . . . Then, when he reached the telephone, he realised that Kimmie was at Banderton's and it might be difficult to call her there. Difficult but not impossible. He booked a personal call to Miss Kimmie Blaxland at the Banderton Dramatic Academy and was told by the

Operator to wait. He stood and fumed and fretted by the telephone booth until he was called.

"I'm sorry, sir. Miss Kimmie Blaxland is out having lunch."

Kimmie was trying to eat something. Her inside felt like a jelly. What was Michael thinking? What was his reaction to D.P.'s telegram? Perhaps it was what he wanted . . . it gave him his freedom, as it were, to do what he liked about Brenda Swift. Oh, how she regretted the night that they met that woman in the pub—and, later at the Ballet. There should be a law about such blatant hussies. . . .

D.P. stared moodily about her. She and Kimmie had slipped out quickly and avoided the boys and gone down to the Strand for lunch. Kimmie, naturally, was on tenterhooks. D.P. was not feeling too good herself. Her telegram was all right whilst Eustace was Kimmie's fiancé, but now that he was not . . . even if Michael reacted in the way she hoped, later, when he realised he had been tricked . . .

"Not very hungry, are you?" clucked the waitress, who hoped she looked like Greer Garson.

The two girls shook their heads sorrowfully.

"Love always does put you off your food," the waitress added knowingly. She smiled in a warm, understanding way like Greer Garson.

D.P. glared at her: "We have scarlet fever!" she said, indignantly. The typist who was pretending to read a new Alan Kennington thriller, promptly snapped the book to, and hurried out. The waitress looked very put out for a moment but, remembering Greer Garson, said bravely: "You'll get over it." She moved serenely away. She hoped she walked like Greer Garson.

Kimmie frowned at her: "Which did she mean?" she enquired. D.P. shrugged her shoulders. She watched the waitress walk away.

"Who does she remind you, of?" D.P. asked Kimmie.

"Joan Davidson," Kimmie promptly replied.

"Me, too," said Dead Pan.

"Do you think . . . ?" Kimmie began.

"I've no idea." D.P. replied, reading her thoughts.

Michael went into lunch at his hotel and gave his lunch order to the waiter. He decided not to join Phyllida or any of the others, and, although he saw his stage manager sitting alone at a table for two, he did not sit with him, either. He wanted to *think*. What *were* his reactions to Kimmie's engagement? Obviously he must stop it. She was making a fool of herself. But, then, listen to him—as if he hadn't! But in preventing Kimmie from marrying Eustace Harradine, what . . . ? That is, if he stopped her marrying Eustace Harradine, why . . . ? That is; had he a *right* to stop her becoming engaged to anyone she pleased? True, they had been seeing a great deal of one another—oh, come now, more than that! Well, they were, to use a Banderton expression which he disliked, they were "having a Thing" together. But did

that give him the prerogative to forbid her to become engaged to someone else? Yes; if he felt that he could make her happier! Yes—if he felt she was doing something because of something he had done. Yes, if—but could he make her happier? Pretty obviously he was more suited to her than Eustace Harradine—or, at any rate, he was conceited enough to think so. Yes, if . . . but did he want to lose all the things he felt important—freedom, self-dependency, comradeship?

The waiter, with a face that had more lines than Clapham Junction, toddled up to the table with the soup.

“Sorry, Charles, I’ve changed my mind,” Michael said.

“Some pâté, sir?”

“Nothing, thanks.”

“Oh, my gracious, sir!” Charles exclaimed.

Michael left the table and crossed the dining room to join his stage manager.

“Bill” he said. “I’m nipping down to London—don’t tell any of the company—if Miss Bentley-Goddard knew, she’d start giving the audience her bag of tricks again—and it’s been tough enough to get her out of ‘em.”

“When will you be back, sir?”

“Tomorrow. I’m only going down tonight.”

“O.K., sir. The show’s in good shape. You won’t be missed.”

“Thanks!”

“What I meant was—”

“I know, Bill. See you tomorrow.”

“Right-o.”

Michael walked out of the room smiling at Phyllida as he paused some distance from her table. She had Reginald Harlow at her table and the girl who played the maid.

“Now where, do you suppose, is the glamorous Miss Swift?” Phyllida asked.

“Perhaps,” said Reginald Harlow, “she really was going to meet her people, after all!”

Phyllida let out an inadvertent “oh!”

She had not thought of that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WHEN Michael arrived at Euston, he took a taxi at once to Armynter Court, paid it off outside the courtyard and hurried across to Kimmie’s flatlet. Kimmie was out but, in the flat below, Roy Malone who had watched him come across the yard, waited silently, listening. He heard Michael curse to himself when there was no answer to his ring at Kimmie’s door. He listened as Michael Dane walked slowly down the stairs. He watched Michael go into the *Duke’s Arms*.

Michael looked quickly round the *Duke’s Arms* but did not see

Kimmie. Queenie, summing him up in a moment, decided he was an acceptable customer, called out a cheery "Good evening, sir!"

Michael smiled back at her and said he would be in later. He promptly went out again, prompting Mr. Flarfy, who had also returned to London, to observe: "Three more customers like that my dear and you'd be bankrupt!" Queenie laughed, wheezed and coughed.

Rory Malone's eyes followed Michael Dane as he re-crossed the yard; watched him look in at Casardi's, saw him peer into the Milk Bar, narrowed as they saw him go into Armynter Court Mansions.

Rory uttered a sharp exclamation: 'That's it, that's right! If one's not home, go and see the other. . . .' He turned hurriedly from the window, he moved a batch of old sketches from the top of an ancient trunk, he delved down, searching for an object he had concealed. . . .

Away from his point of vantage at the window, he failed to see Michael, who had slipped a note into Brenda Swift's letter box, emerge from the Mansions and go into Jermyn Street. He walked through to Piccadilly and jumped on a 'bus getting off at Hyde Park where he crossed and went into his club, frowning, wondering where he could find Kimmie and cutting his old Group Captain who beamed on him, as he came out, aglow with several preprandial sherries. His G.C. snorted and stumped off, muttering "Never thought I'd live to see the day when one of my pilots deliberately cut me in me own club—and I only had four or five sherries!"

Michael, oblivious to this, was thinking 'I can't very well sit in the *Duke's Arms* all the evening—nor do I know where to catch her. I'd better have a meal and go round later.' He wondered if Brenda Swift had read his note. But the note lay on the mat in Brenda's flat unopened. Brenda was with Judy Gwendolyn. They were going to drive down to Maidenhead for a late dinner with Judy's new boy friend, a rich young Argentinian.

Michael decided that, if Kimmie's parents were on the telephone, he would give them a ring; see what their reaction was to Kimmie's engagement. Yet—really, he had no right to—Of course he had, this was absurd. He had as much right as the next man; more so! He went to the telephone and tried to locate the Blaxlands, in vain.

Luff and Diddy were not on the telephone but, at the time when Michael was trying to find them in the book, they were whipping-up a scratch meal for Kimmie, Dead Pan and the three boys. The Frightful Five had arrived at Elstree without warning. It all happened rather unexpectedly for Charles Grafton's Uncle Jim had come to town. Uncle Jim was a very rich man and he had a very shining Cadillac. He thought the world of Charles and could not refuse his request when Charles asked if he could borrow it. With the result that, since they had no definite destination in mind (and, since it was no good Kimmie moping about Armynter Court), D.P.'s suggestion that they should drive down and visit Kimmie's people was promptly acclaimed.

Diddy hurriedly prepared the meal and Luff, who admitted ruefully that he had put his comic strip character Kandy the Koala down a

well and couldn't get him out, managed to find enough mugs and glasses, all chipped and all varying in size, to give the three boys a beer and the girls a cider.

Charles could not help pulling Eustace Harradine's leg by asking the Blaxlands over the meal if they had heard of Kimmie's engagement to Eustace, and nearly upset the convivial atmosphere, but, fortunately, Eustace, taking it well now, seeing a certain amount of limelight in his escapade, assured the startled Blaxlands that he would always remain a bachelor, no matter how many Kimmie's proposed to him. Luff, gazing in happy admiration at his daughter, sighed when he thought that Kimmie was grown up indeed when people started thinking of marriage. And Kimmie sighed, too, wondering if Michael would telephone the *Duke's Arms* and what would happen if he sent a telegram congratulating the Blaxlands on their daughter's engagement.

After he had failed to locate the Blaxlands in the Telephone Book, Michael decided the next best thing to do, whilst awaiting Kimmie's return to her flat, was to pop into the Lyric and the Savoy to see how his two productions were being played and received, and, so annoyed was he with Selica Bagley at the Savoy that he realised, no matter how much he wanted to see Kimmie, he must see the good lady; so that's what happened when they thought he was out of town; she was getting a lot more laughs, it was true, but she was 'cheating' in that she was turning to the audience and getting them from admitting that there was such a thing as an audience—and, the show she was in, was *not* a Restoration comedy! Yes, he simply had to go backstage to reprimand Selica—she was worse than Phyllida.

He walked through the Pass Door and along to her dressing room, wondering if Kimmie were home and Kimmie, in the back of Charles Grafton's Uncle's Cadillac, en route back to London, was wondering if he had rung the *Duke's Arms* and if so, if he had left a message.

"We'll all have a beer at my local," she suggested.

D.P. did not say anything but she smiled in the darkness of the car and squeezed Kimmie's hand.

"I think you've got something there," Harry Barlow said.

In Armynter Court a large open car drove up and Brenda Swift was helped out by a young man with a long moustache who raised his hat stiffly and nodded cheerily. Brenda, who was shivering with the cold, waved to Judy, the other occupant of the car, and hurried into the Mansions. The prowling Rory, who had been down to the *Duke's Arms* for a drink, stood in the shadow of the saloon bar entrance and watched her. Weak-minded Arthur also watched her, from the centre of the courtyard where he stood, under its light, wondering if he had anything he should be doing other than just standing . . . just standing and watching and . . . but he ought to be home! He stepped forward and hurried across the courtyard then, just as suddenly, pulled himself up with a jerk. . . . Now where was he going? He must concentrate, try to think. . . .

In the flat, sitting so that he could see the door as soon as it opened, and holding Michael Dane's note in his hand, was Ralph Checker. His eyes were glittering dangerously. He rose menacingly, waving the note in one hand. Gone was the kindly mood that had been all-triumphant that morning—the *understanding* mood. Gone, indeed, was all sympathy, all feeling for Brenda Swift.

"You dirty little slut!" Was his greeting. "What does this mean?"

He stopped waving Michael's note and threw it down in front of her so that she would have to pick it up.

"What's the matter with you?" she spat back at him. Really, he had become intolerable. "What are you doing here?"

"What's the matter with me?" He repeated and laughed cynically. "That's good. The matter with me, my girl, is that I've just woken up."

Brenda looked at the envelope which had been slit open along the top. The envelope was clearly addressed to her.

"Since when have I given you permission to open my mail?" She asked.

"I don't need permission. And, in any case, don't start arguing about this and that—you explain and explain dam' quick!" Ralph said. She glanced up from the handwriting, trying to place it, realising from Ralph's tone that this was a mood she did not know. She glared at him, hating him, wondering how she could ever have been intimate with him.

"Read it!" He shouted.

She opened the note, written on the Manchester hotel stationery. It said.

"Thank you, Brenda, for what we have had, and what we could have had, but I've suddenly decided what I want of life and I think you made the decision for me. Gratefully,

MICHAEL.

"Well?" Ralph shouted. "Well?"

"Well what, my fine friend?" Brenda shouted back at him. "What do you want to know?"

"Who's this Michael and what were you doing up in Manchester with him? Trying to make a chump out of me, were you? I do the paying while all the time,——"

"Shut up, you big overgrown louse, you!" She snapped at him. "I told you when I walked out at the Cabana we were through and I'll tell you who Michael is—Michael's the first man I've met who has treated me as a human being. Michael is the only man I could have loved. Michael is everything you're not!"

"You dirty little bitch!" He rushed across and smacked her across the mouth. She reeled back and fell against the door, surprise in her eyes; surprise followed by blazing indignation.

"Get out! Get out of here!" she shouted.

"I'm going—and I hope you find some bigger b.f. to pay the rent."

"Get out—get out, you swine!" Blood started to trickle from the corner of her mouth. She could feel it trickling down and dropping on the Chinese carpet, the white, lush, expensive carpet, it reminded her of the days when her father sloshed her in Long Acre when he caught her fiddling about with one of the boys next door. Then the blood fell on to the floor boards. . . . She had hated then; she hated now. . . .

Ralph stood there, breathing heavily, glaring at her. Ashamed now, when he saw the blood. Hitting a woman. God! He never thought he would hit a woman. He would be punished for that. He shouldn't have hit her. Not on the mouth. Tanned her backside, perhaps—but to strike a woman. Still, the little tramp—! Making a sucker out of him like that! And he thinking she was protecting her gaol-bird father. He was right to have hit her. He—.

"Will you get out?" She said quietly, hating . . . hating . . . He left without another word.

In the courtyard, in the shadows, opposite the Mansions entrance, by Maxie's cigarette kiosk, Rory Malone stood waiting, clutching the Commando knife in his hand. He smiled as the figure groped his way out of the front door of the Mansions. Strange how the light bulb over the front door should be missing! Neat. He had organised that all right. He was taking no chances of being recognised. He waited, licking his lips nervously, the palms of his hands itching beneath the woollen gloves and blobs of sweat on his brow. The figure came away from the door and swiftly Rory ran across. He closed with the figure and he stabbed, twice.

"You dirty double-crossing swine! That for Kimmie!" He whispered as he plunged the Commando knife into Ralph Checker's back. "That for me!" He said, stabbing again.

Ralph gave a gasp and attempted to call out, then falling, knocked himself out on the cobble stones. Without waiting another moment, Rory threw the knife into the centre of the courtyard, turned and sped into Jermyn Street, crossed the road, returned and watched from a doorway. As he hoped, Weak-minded Arthur picked up the Commando knife. He looked at its crimson blade, and started to cry. He ran crying with it into the *Duke's Arms*.

A few minutes later, Rory, standing on the pavement opposite the courtyard, watched them come running out of the *Duke's Arms*, saw them carry the body into the hall of the Mansions, heard the ambulance bell and the police car arrive. Saw them take the body away. Saw them take Weak-minded Arthur away in the police car. Watched them all dribble back, talking volubly, into the *Duke's Arms*. Rory Malone smiled. Neat. Very neat. No trouble at all. That will teach you,—young Master Dane.

Trembling excitedly he went off to the *Bunch of Grapes* for a drink. A large limousine belonging to Charles Grafton's Uncle and driven by the complacent Charles passed him and if he had turned he would have seen it swing into the courtyard and stop.

Kimmie Blaxland, D.P. and the boys got out and, hearing Queenie's "Time Gentlemen Please!" hurried into the *Duke's Arms* which was crammed to capacity.

"Good heavens, what's happening here tonight, Queenie giving out free beer?"

"See if you can get to the bar, Harry, she likes you," Kimmie suggested.

"Queenie's birthday?" Kimmie asked Kid Cato, who stood by the door, talking excitedly to Casardi who was talking equally excitedly back.

"Weren't you 'ere? Lucky you don' see it. It is 'orrid!" Casardi replied, before the Kid could tell Kimmie.

"What's happened?"

"Weak-minded Arthur. He got hold of Bert's knife—well, it was Maxie's, I think."

"Thatsa right, Maxie bought it from Bert. Bert, he says so," Casardi said nodding vigorously.

"What did he do?"

"He stab a man!" Casardi said dramatically, making the gesture with his closed fist at Eustace's back.

Rory Malone, thinking of the details, re-living the episode, smiled nervously as he passed a policeman, took off his woollen gloves and threw them casually into a dust bin which had been put outside the *Bunch of Grapes* for the morning. Woollen gloves. No finger marks. All too easy—and Arthur took the rap. Too neat. Too easy. He pushed at the door of the saloon bar of the *Bunch of Grapes*. It was closed. The last few customers stood talking, swaying outside, re-iterating points in their conversation they wanted to emphasise. . . .

"Yes, but if the T.U.C. had . . . "

"Man, I tell you . . . "

"I give you my solemn word . . . "

Suddenly Rory stopped smiling. What happened when the police learned he had bought the knife from Maxie the barber? He gulped. He turned and hurried back to Armynter Court, thinking up possible explanations, rejecting them, thinking-up new ones . . . think, think, Rory Malone. Too easy. It was too neat. No trouble at all. Yes; but Maxie sold *you* the knife. How did you lose it? You dropped it in the courtyard. *Funny you didn't hear it fall, Rory Malone?* Now, take it easy! Take it easy. Got to think of something. Got to get an alibi in, quick. Go into the pub and ask if anyone had seen it. How would that be? Too obvious. Too suspicious. *Too easy, eh, Rory boy?*

He hurried back, quickening his pace, beginning to run.

He ran across the courtyard towards the pub. They were coming out of the pub, all talking, all talking about the stabbing. Quickly! He must establish that he'd lost the Commando knife. Quickly, quickly . . .

"Has anybody . . . ?" He began to shout. But they were busy

talking. Casardi and Kid Cato. Even Mr. Brember the yacht man. And Mr. Flarf the Commercial, laying down the law to One-armed Bert.

"I tell you I sold it to Maxie. And I think he got rid of it. He's gone to the Palladium tonight. Tomorrow we'll——"

Tomorrow! Quickly, quickly . . .

"Has anyone . . . ?"

But they were not taking any notice of him. Suddenly he saw Kimmie.

Kimmie. It was for you, Kimmie. Kimmie, my darling.

"Hallo, Rory. You do look pale."

She was addressing him and the icy Dippy was watching him. Kimmie and some young men.

"It's all right, Kimmie! It's all right now! It was for the best," he said, talking quickly. "Weak-minded Arthur got hold of my knife. He—he meant it for the best . . . "

"What *are* you talking about?" Kimmie asked. She looked at him in perplexity.

"It was for the best, Kimmie. He meant it for the best. It served him right, you know. He—he was double-crossing you."

"What *are* you drivelling about, Rory?"

"It was an accident. He doesn't know what he's doing, poor fellow. All a mistake but perhaps the hand of providence—an—an—" he tried to find the right metaphor, "An Avenging Angel".

"Are you talking about the man Arthur stabbed?" D.P. asked him, frigidly.

"Of course, of course. Coming out of the Mansions apparently—seeing that girl in there. It was a Judgment surely?"

"Rory! Who—who was the man?" A great fear suddenly took possession of Kimmie, she shivered violently. "No. Not——?"

"Michael Dane, of course."

"Michael Dane?"

"What?"

"Michael . . . no . . . no. He's in Manchester. He couldn't . . ." Kimmie began.

"Look out, she's going to faint!"

"Michael . . . "

Kimmie swayed, and, momentarily blacked-out. Charles Grafton stepped forward in time to hold her up.

"I'm—I'm all right. I——"

"Good glory! There *is* Michael Dane!" D.P. exclaimed. Walking towards them was Michael. Kimmie opened her eyes.

"Michael! Michael are you hurt—oh darling, darling!" She ran towards him, half-laughing, half crying. He ran to meet her, and they embraced.

"Oh, darling, darling Michael!"

"Kimmie. Listen, Sweet, let me talk, let me talk very fast. Don't be engaged, Sweet, I only realised once I was away from you what I

really wanted in life. . . . Kim, if you must be engaged—and I don't want to hurt poor old Eustace—will you please be engaged to me?"

Staring wide-eyed, dazed, Rory watched the lovers kiss.

"But—but I stabbed him. He—he can't . . . I stabbed him *twice*. He's—he's not even hurt."

Mr. Flarf^y nodded to Kid Cato, who nodded back and both of them made a grab at Rory and pinioned his arms.

"Get a policeman!" Mr. Flarf^y called out and Mr. Brember hurried off like a hare.

"You done it, you big piece-a cheese!" shouted Casardi, "'oo you done?"

"I—I—I don't know." Rory Malone stuttered. "He's been seeing that girl—that woman up in the Mansions. He's been treating her like dirt—my Kimmie," Rory said. Only D.P. was listening to him. "Doesn't she realize? She doesn't know, that he was—"

"Oh, yes she does," D.P. said. He looked at her queerly. She talked quite kindly to him. Her tone was quite different.

"I—I stabbed him for her," he explained. He wanted her to know that.

"You stabbed someone else, Rory. You're crazier than Arthur but I suppose you had the right idea," she said. Mr. Flarf^y and the Kid exchanged glances.

"You never believed I loved her, did you?" He challenged her.

"No," she admitted. "I didn't."

The constable who had put Rory to bed the previous evening appeared, calmly, slowly and with great dignity.

"Well, what's going on here? Hallo, you again, is it?" he said, nodding at Rory, held between Mr. Flarf^y and Kid Cato.

"This man did the stabbing, Officer. He's admitted it," Mr. Flarf^y told the policeman.

The policeman sighed.

"Why do people call constables 'officer'?" He enquired of no one in particular. "Now, what stabbing is this you're talking about?"

They all began to tell him.

Ralph Checker, puzzled martyr, recovered after a long bout in hospital. His wife and children came up from Westcliff twice a week to see him, and, when he was discharged, he took them all to Dinard for an autumn holiday where he met a red-headed film actress he rather liked and who, having a sweet tooth, enjoyed the privileges of the butter scotch trade. He later set her up in a small apartment off the Buckingham Palace Road.

Brenda Swift gave up her luxury flat in Armynter Court Mansions because she had a chance to go to Paris. Bart, her Shaef Colonel re-appeared, as a civilian, and he had big business contacts on the Continent. He also had a large Chrysler in which he proposed to tour his European 'contacts.' Brenda always did want to see the South of France.

Charles Grafton won the Banderton Gold Medal and was promptly signed up for films by D'Artagnan Productions in Hollywood where, to quote, Michael Dane, "His acting grew continually poorer as his banking account grew larger." Everyone was surprised when Dead Pan, deciding that there was no future in the theatre, flew to California and married him—everyone, that is, except Kimmie Blaxland who said "I told you so!"

Harry Barlow left the Banderton and started a jazz band and can be heard regularly on the B.B.C. radiating from a well-known night club. Eustace Harradine stayed on at the Banderton and won the next year's Gold Medal (Joan Davidson winning the Girl's Competition again) and he was to become a useful addition to the West End stage, inevitably stealing all the notices but never quite showing enough personality to become a star. Michael Dane often used him in his productions, when he had the right part for him.

Kimmie gave up her little flatlet in Armynter Court when she married and Mr. Flarf, who decided that he liked the neighbourhood so much, he would live there, took it over. Priscilla managed to get Kid Cato to the altar but he spent a great part of the day wondering if he could afford it. Maxie moved into Rory Malone's flat, beneath Mr. Flarf, and took his breakfast at the Milk Bar where he daily met Mr. Brember, and Min of the pale-pink falsies, smiled winningly and gave them "sooper" service.

Weak-minded Arthur was back and was still tormented by the Casardi boys, whilst the Terry kids still tried to swipe Maxie's cigarettes when he was clipping a customer's hair. Mrs. Starling still remembered the good old days and Queenie's wheeze grew worse as winter approached. Things went on just the same at Armynter Court—but they all missed Kimmie.

Kimmie Blaxland, quite rightly, decided that Michael needed a London flat for his work, but they lived at week-ends in the country, near Luff and Diddy. They decided that when the baby arrived, boy or girl, its name would be Kimmie.



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